

*The  
Stolen Bride*

*W. H. Williamson*

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# THE STOLEN BRIDE



# THE STOLEN BRIDE

By

W. H. WILLIAMSON

*Author of "The Traitor's Wife," "A Family of  
Influence," "The Prince's Marriage," etc.*

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## CHAPTER I

"A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,  
Incapable of pity, void and empty  
From every drachm of mercy."

—*Merchant of Venice.*

THE sun was sinking in a blood-red flame. The tall firs, outlined against the grey-blue sky, showed like sentinels of a Nature, grim, callous and unmoved. The southing of a gentle wind just caught the ear, and the rustling of the leaves on a clump of birch added a wailing note, but otherwise all was unresponsive. Hope seemed to lie neither over the trees, towards the horizon, or with the flowing river. Nature was vast and terrible, and many men are born to pain. The sun sank to the colour of blood.

A youth aged nineteen and a girl fifteen, with faces white and fearful, betraying an agony of mind too cruel for their years, stood together behind a sheltering birch. He was holding her, she clutching him in despair and the pain that moved her. An old woman, with bent head and shaking body, sitting on a stone, held the skirt of the girl with a thin, bony hand. She had been praying, but her soul was numbed and without hope, and she prayed from habit for relief.

To this little group the powers of evil and the evils of power were being made clear.

Just within sight of them a band of peasants, with timid, sheep-like attitude, watched one of their number, a stout, lusty giant, knout the steward. The punishment was awful. At each stroke of the hateful lash the bloody flesh of the poor steward quivered, spurted its meed of blood, and then shivered and welled again. The groans of the victim could be heard distinctly by his mother and two children who stood near the birch tree. The mother, when the knouting had begun, looked up to Heaven and then at once shut her eyes and hung her head. The girl buried her face on her brother's breast and after the first sob and the almost paralysing pain of it made no more noise, but just squeezed her brother to her utmost and shut her lips with fierceness. The youth seemed as though he must be held back. He shook like a tree in a gale when he heard the first swishes and the cries of his father. He shut his eyes and twisted his face horribly as if the cruel lash had cut him too. He had comforted his grandmother and sister as well as he could, and now, dulled and weary, he waited for the end, so that he might succour and soothe, if any chance remained for ministrations of that kind.

The man with the bloody knout stopped, looked at Count Stolemkin, his master, and waited.

"That will do," said the Count, and he gazed for a moment at the broken piece of humanity lying on the ground before him.

Then he turned to the peasants, his serfs, who watched him now with expectant, dreading eyes.



“That’s the way I treat those who don’t do their duty,” he shouted. “You saw: Now you know. Let me catch one of you——” He nodded with the simplest of gestures and the easiest of meanings. “Get off to your kennels,” he added with an imperious wave of the hand, and the wretched creatures slunk with one accord out of the sight of their lord and master.

Count Stolemkin approached the battered steward.

“Lift him up,” he said to the executioner, who dropped the knout, walked to the helpless man with the raw back lying groaning on the floor, and picked him up. Peter Glebof, the humane steward, with the humanity knouted out of him, groaned a little more as he was moved. He did not understand what this lifting up meant, for he really understood very little at this moment. His grip on the world was a very feeble thing after forty strokes with the knout. He had merely enough understanding to disdain life. The longer groan was involuntary.

“It’s my lord’s hand,” said the man who held him.

But Peter Glebof cared nothing for my lord’s hand. He was in the hands of death. Eternity was beckoning him to a marvellous rest, and my lord’s hand was held to him to kiss! He was also to murmur, “I thank you,” so as to keep count with custom.

“My lord’s hand!” shouted the big ruffian.

My lord looked at the inert mass, at the raw-cut, shivering flesh, and realized there was not much good left in the man.

“Put him down and fetch a priest,” he said, and

he turned on his heel towards the castle, where a luxurious meal was awaiting him.

Melibof said, "Yes, your Excellency," and he put the steward—such as he was now—on the ground and made off towards the village where the priest lived.

The youth by the tree looked and listened.

"They've gone," he said.

The girl, scarcely daring to open her eyes, loosened very gradually her firm embrace.

"Oh! where is he?" she asked with horror and agony in the voice of youth, ageing it and making it preternaturally striking.

"Come on," said Juri, the youth. He looked soul-tired, but something in his attitude was arresting, as if he had had his feelings crushed and yet would move like a giant stirred by some terrific emotion. He touched the bending woman.

"They've gone, grandmother," he said.

She didn't move.

"Grandmother," said the girl.

"Eh—eh——" It was a wail. Hope and peace had been trampled under foot and her voice was a *Nunc Dimittis*.

Juri lifted her up and she moaned, and then the three went towards where the poor man, with the back cut to ribbons, was lying.

The scene was poignant, for the grief was heart-rending. The poor steward seemed to realize his own were about him, but he knew he was nearer kin to death than to anything living now. And his own could give him no comfort, for they were unnerved and he was past human comfort. The

mother who had borne and suckled him took his head in her lap, and his two children took his hands, and they waited like dumb creatures, impotent before a great disaster. He lay still, and they bent helpless beside him. And death in kind fashion called the steward from his sufferings.

The three living sat still, not knowing of the release, and the priest and the executioner found them there.

Melibof, seeing his handiwork noted by his victim's family, slunk away. Youth and old age, children and mothers, can be very reproachful without uttering a word.

"He is dead," said the priest.

The three started. They moaned and wailed. The mother kissed her dead son's face. Juri took his sister in his arms again.

The priest said a prayer and then went away.

In that day the story was common, particularly in Russia, where men's passions were allowed an outlet wild, savage and uncontrolled. Peter the Great had knouted Russia, and the serfs and dependents felt the crack of the whip whenever the anger of a barbarous master was stirred. Count Stolemkin was a fierce man, with a keen zest for the strong in life. He had fought at Pultowa under Peter the Great, when the young hero of Sweden tasted defeat and Russia rose to renown. He gambled high and drank deep, and wanted more from his serfs than they could give—and live. That was the reason Peter Glebof died.

Peter Glebof was the Count's steward in one por-

tion of his estate, and the Count being pressed for money in Moscow sent for it to Nazeff where Glebof was steward. The serfs toiled and moiled and Glebof did what he could—that is, what a man with a reasonable heart and mind could. He did not want to send the peasants to find food on their hands and knees like cattle, and it is possible the craftiest among them took advantage of his leniency. That is one of Nature's tricks. Spare the rod and spoil yourself. The weak in passion or mind will always go to excess and reap the harvest of wind sowing.

Count Stolemkin came from St. Petersburg in an ugly mood. He had lost heavily, and in the grab for rewards at Court he met men as capable as himself, and so did not secure over much—at least, as much as he wanted, though his friendship with Ostermann was an asset. He first accused the steward of peculation and then of idleness, then of a host of misdeeds, but the charge was of small importance—the essential was the example. His Excellency was in the humour to stand no nonsense in the way of sentiment or the pleadings of justice. His object was increased wealth, and if he made an example of one man he hoped to increase the fruits of many. The idea is old, outrageously exaggerated and essentially human.

So Count Stolemkin stormed, cursed, and struck. The steward defended himself, but that only made matters worse, for to attempt reasonableness with a ruffian only stirs him to more rage. You are actually taking his excuse for violence from him, and his emotion goeth not out but by blows and basting.

Hence this tragedy.

The peasants huddled together in their semi-underground huts : but beside Peter Glebof, as he lay at peace at last on the ground, his mother and his two children remained. They scarcely knew what to do. The mother was passive : she had known brutality all her life and very little of the beautiful. But this was her son who had been good to her, and his back—purple, vermilion, puce, black, grey—was horrible. She was almost content he was dead. It was ended now. She was ready to die herself, for life was not uniformly pleasant.

The children were different.

"We'll go away," whispered the youth to his sister.

She looked at him in some admiration and alarm, and then nodded inquiringly towards the grandmother.

"Take her too," he said. He seemed full of resolution's capacity.

The girl, Sofia, looked at him searchingly. She felt the iron in his soul and will and liked both. She herself felt capable of great deeds.

"Where shall we go ? " she asked.

He nodded towards the forests.

"Easily hide there—we shall be better off than here. And——"

"Yes ? "

"Perhaps we will come back some day."

She looked at him admiringly and understood quickly. She grasped his hand, and he knew then she was at one with him.

"Some day," he muttered.

"Yes—don't you mind how they killed Jacob——"



"Sh!" he said with swift caution and looked round. He nodded to her for understanding. She sighed as if relieved.

Peter Glebof's mother followed her son into eternal rest the day the dead steward was buried. She died willingly, refusing to clutch at life any longer.

A week later Juri and Sofia Glebof were missing from Nazeff. There was a hue and cry and a search, but these were superfluities. The runaways were not caught. Moreover, Nazeff had not seen the last of them.

## CHAPTER II

"Remember, it's as easy to marry a rich woman as a poor woman."

—*Pendennis*:

FOUR years have passed—a little more, to be precise—but we feel sure the reader is not to a month or so.

Count Stolemkin is now in Petersburg, and still desirous of increasing his supply of roubles. This was a habit of his, engendered probably by other habits. He was in the house he had been compelled by his illustrious master, Peter (now dead), to build in this swamp. He preferred Moscow, but Petersburg was really a wonderful city. He sat this morning smoking, drinking and pondering. He was not a philosopher, so his pondering must not be taken too seriously. Roubles—that was the principal theme, mingled with cards, beer, Hungarian wine, brandy, women, the opportunities for ease and satisfaction, some stories concerning the Princess Elizabeth Petrovna, also some cunning affairs of the Count Ostermann's, and most perhaps, what he should do with his son Vasili. Not much in the way of a gentle or genial philosophy. He was a fairly big man, with cold, staring blue eyes, a squat

nose, thick lips, and a bull neck. A man to knout anybody in a passion and drink with the best.

He had fought well under Peter and been well rewarded. He had quite a scent for rewards. But with the sheathing of his sword and the card-table occupying him more than the camp, he ceased to increase his possessions, while his capacity for distribution remained enormous. He licked life gustily nevertheless, and smacked his lips over it.

He was in a room of barbaric splendour and perplexing taste. Persian rugs of mellow richness lay on a boarded floor of questionable cleanliness. Chairs of French design and manufacture surrounded a plain, uncovered deal table bought at Nijni Novgorod. The incongruous tickled a man of parts the moment he entered the room. Enter some one in keeping—Baron Demidoff, as neat a man as you would find on the Neva for procuring worry for his friends when he could do it craftily. He looked at the jewelled ikon in the corner and bowed magnificently.

“*Mier efdom Zjeiewoesonon*,” he said. “Peace be in this house and those who dwell in it.”

Peace! Did Demidoff see the humour of it?

Then he nodded to Count Stolemkin and drank brandy with him—then beer.

“Have you heard, Anton Gregorovitch,” said Baron Demidoff, addressing his friend, “that Puroff is dead?”

“Puroff? Peace to him. I won two thousand roubles from him the last time I played with him. Not a bad loser, though.”

“And he did not lose on the whole, eh?”



"No. He got his share, too, of pickings. Tsar Peter was very good to him."

"Estates in Livonia, Revel, Ukraine and Moscow ; jewels to set a Court staring ; enough wood and stone to build a new Petersburg ; fishing rights on the Volga worth a ransom, and thirty thousand serfs."

Count Stolemkin's blue eyes twinkled with the pleasant ideas that suggestions of wealth stirred up in his mind.

"He grabbed," he said laconically.

"Heartily and heavily."

"And now he is dead—what will he grab now, eh, Paul Nicholavitch ? "

Paul Nicholavitch Demidoff pulled a face. Both men were firm believers in this life and the next—but this one more particularly.

"He has left one child, I believe," said Demidoff.

"Ha ! A boy ? "

"No—daughter."

"Daughter ! What will she do with those estates ? " There was contempt and avarice in the tone. A girl with those——

Baron Demidoff paused, for his mischievous soul was chuckling and he wished to let his next remark stand out with excellent clearness.

"Marry some one," he said, "who will relieve her of her burdens."

His eyes had a droop that was hintful of possibilities.

Count Stolemkin, though not particularly bright, was not dull.

"Marry ! By the saints ! She will be a good

match." He stared at his friend. "His only child did you say, Paul Nicholavitch?"

"Who inherits all," and Baron Paul Nicholavitch Demidoff nodded his head affirmatively and emphasingly.

Stolemkin was swallowing the bait.

"How old is she?" he asked with interest.

"The right age to marry, my friend."

"By St. Peter and St. Paul! And Vasili, my son, is also of the right age to marry——"

Swallowed!

"Anton Gregorovitch, you see far and well. Vasili Antonovitch married to the heiress of our deceased friend Puroff would have wealth to finance a Charles XII."

Count Stolemkin called for champagne for his friend.

"My son Vasili is no King of Sweden," said the candid parent, "but he may be more fortunate."

"That is not difficult, considering you already see him in possession of the Puroff estates," said Demidoff, who wished to take his friend to a high mountain, as it were, show him great and rich treasures and tempt him with the possibilities. It was not difficult to tempt Count Stolemkin.

"I suppose the Duke of Courland would help me," he said, in rather a ruminating kind of way, as if he were not quite sure that Biren would.

"Why not?"

"Exactly; why not? There will be no harm in asking."

"None whatever. Who does not ask goes

hungry." He was also thinking : Not all who ask get what they want.

Count Stolemkin decided that a marriage between his son Vasili and the daughter (sole heiress !) of the late Count Puroff would be a union blessed by Providence. The idea was most cherishable.

The Count, when his friend had gone, called for his son Vasili and expounded the proposal.

"It is time you wed, my son," said the calculating father, "and you will find no better match in Russia."

"I may not like the—the Countess."

"Like her—pouf ! Estates in Livonia, Ukraine, Revel and the Lord knows where, more jewels than you will find in Moscow and Persia, wood and stone enough to build ten cities like this, and enough fish to feed the whole world if there happened to be a famine. Do you like that ? "

"I am not over fond of fish, my father, and what should I do with all that wood ? "

"My son, fish and wood can be exchanged for roubles, and with roubles you can do pretty well what you want, where you want, when you want, and also how. Don't sniff at fish and wood. It is time you married and started seeing the advantage of exchanging fish and wood for roubles."

"I am not anxious, my father," said the pale, anæmic Vasili, whose heart was fuller of decent intentions than his legs and arms of muscles—comparatively, of course.

The big father scowled.

"By the Saints ! What have I done to offend High Heaven that I should be cursed with a mew-

ling, puling son who daren't go out if it's cold, and can't stir if it's warm, and seems to be afraid of a bit of a wench. Not anxious." He mimicked his frail offspring's voice.

Count Vasili Antonovitch Stolemkin was a pale, clean-shaven young man, just twenty years of age, with thoughtful eyes (brown and timid), a thin-nostrilled nose, thin lips, a weak chin with a dimple, spindle legs and nice hands. A mother's son, every inch of him, and no more a chip of the old block than the mouse was like the mountain.

He looked fearsomely at his father.

"A bright store of honour you are going to bring on your family, I can see," said the Count Stolemkin with rich irony. "Cover it with glory!" He shook his head as if he would like to take his son by the neck (perhaps in his teeth) and shake him.

"I will do as you wish, my father."

"By all the demons of Hell! I know you will. I will make you climb Jacob's ladder, go down with Jonah into the belly of the whale, or eat fish and dance on wood till you are sick, if I wish. By the blessed ikon! I pray you may have a wife who will help you to beget a son as unlike you as you are unlike me. Here."

He poured him out a huge tumbler of brandy.

"Drink that."

Vasili shuddered and looked pleadingly at his father.

"Drink it!" shouted the old campaigner.

"All?" came the timid voice.

"I'll fill a 'great eagle' for you if you don't swallow it at once."

Vasili prayed (silently) and drank. Then he collapsed. The old man sneered and went out to make arrangements for having an audience of Ernest Biren, Duke of Courland, Lord Chamberlain of Russia, Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, lover of the Empress—the son of a game-keeper. The moral: It is easier to rise by women than by talent.

Count Stolemkin managed to arrange for an audience that day week, after informing the Lord Chamberlain's Secretary of his business.

That day week he called, dressed in a suit of delicate rose colour, to see the all-powerful German, who practically ruled Russia. His lackeys bawled a way for him, and then he waited the pleasure of the Lord Chamberlain, who was detained by Her Majesty the Empress to watch a performance by the Princesses Nastasia and Anisia. It was not a billed affair though, considering the status of the actresses and the nature of the performance, there is no doubt but that the draw would have been colossal. The originator and stage manager was the Empress Anna. She was making the princesses (whose names have already appeared on the programme) gulp balls of pastry, then crouch on pails made of bark and cackle as though they had laid eggs!

So while this went on and Lakosta, a Portuguese Jew, one of the Empress's fools, amused the Court, Count Stolemkin awaited the pleasure of the Lord Chamberlain.

It was a varied crowd that waited, some with appointments and some without, some with hope, some with fear, and most with supplication. Prob-



ably no court in Europe saw such changes of fortune as the Russian in the eighteenth century. No wonder the antechambers of the powerful were crammed with those who waited !

Count Stolemkin saw amongst the crowd two of his friends, Baron Frolof and Count Bulavin. They foregathered and gossiped. Baron Frolof was an irresponsible-tongued creature and babbled of everything. He had about as much discretion as a parrot, and nobody who wished a thing to be hidden told it to him. After he had mentioned all the spicy gossip he knew concerning the Empress, Biren and others, he blurted out : " I wonder if you will guess what I am here for ? "

Count Bulavin said—

" You want to be made chancellor ? "

Frolof looked round in fear.

" If Count Ostermann heard you I should be broken on the wheel ! " Then he grinned, " No." He turned to Stolemkin. " Well, Anton Gregorovitch ? "

Count Stolemkin looked mischievous.

" To ask Biren to give you a chance with the Empress."

Baron Frolof looked fit for bleeding. He gasped.

" Oh ! my friends ! You would ruin me. Me—and the blessed Empress——"

Bulavin chuckled. Stolemkin was quite pleased at the effect of his speech on his friend.

Frolof shook his head at them.

" Rogues ! " he said. " Mind you don't get your tongues cut out ! You are poor guessers. I want to marry my son."

"Ah!" said Bulavin in a quite colourless voice. Stolemkin merely nodded.

"Yes." Frolof was exuberant. "To Puroff's daughter."

"What!"

Frolof had a shock, for this exclamation came from the two and was not at all colourless. It would be difficult to name the colour—it was almost rainbowish, for there were glowering, cloudy foreheads and threatening eyes accompanying it, and heat seemed sure.

Stolemkin and Bulavin looked at each other. They were more wary and not given to babbling freely, but their simultaneous ejaculation and their anxious surprise was a distinct note of betrayal. Frolof did not notice this, but they understood.

Count Bulavin looked at Frolof.

"By St. Nicholas and the Holy Synod! What do you want to marry your son to Puroff's daughter for?"

Baron Frolof, who was dressed in a violet coat and purple breeches, looked surprised and wondered if he ought not to be pained at such a remark.

Before he could answer, Stolemkin, with a very serious look on his countenance, touched Bulavin on his green breeches and said—

"And what have you come for, Nicholas Dimitrivitch—the same errand, by all the saints in the calendar, eh?"

"And you, Anton Gregorovitch—do you want to marry your stalwart son to this offspring of the dead Puroff?"

Stolemkin and Bulavin did not look at each other

with pleasantness in their faces. Frolof began to understand.

"You too—and you? Surely we have not all come——?"

"We have."

They resorted to silence. Frolof would have "Well, well-d" and "Tut-tutted," but the other two looked so grim and glum and anxious for ferocity that he forbore.

When the first blast of passion had expended itself, the three men looked at each other calmly and endeavoured to face the situation in the same spirit.

"I wonder how many more are coming?" said Bulavin sourly.

"Every one with a spare son, I suppose," said Stolemkin, feeling very ugly in spirit.

"It is preposterous," murmured Frolof.

"What is preposterous?" snarled Stolemkin, being in the humour for nasty business.

"Why, that three of us wish to find the daughter of Puroff a husband. The little lady can't have three husbands."

"That is really brilliant, Juri Alexievitch," said Bulavin sneeringly. "Can't have three husbands, eh?—then suppose you retire and let your estimable son find some lady whom he can possess solely and exclusively."

But Frolof, though simple of tongue, had as keen an eye for the main chance as the others, and he could hold his own and reach forward for more, with almost equal ability to theirs.

"While you, Nicholas Dimitrivitch, let your son marry a wife he shares with another——"



"It's a fool's predicament," blurted out Stolemkin.

They agreed and ruminated once more.

"And the Lord Chamberlain has evidently given us an appointment at the same hour," said Bulavin suspiciously after the pause.

"To laugh at us, eh?"

"While he hands the maid over to a German maybe."

"Sh!——"

Men in temper will occasionally say such indiscreet things! But temper is indiscretion.

They waited sulky, brooding and despondent. They gave up hope and only considered how to escape from the Lord Chamberlain's presence with the least loss of dignity.

They were, however, not quite so sure of their dignity when the interview was over. They came from the Lord Chancellor with feelings odd and restless. They did not speak in joyful accents or exude a jovial atmosphere. In fact, they looked deeply and widely perturbed. As friends they seemed to lack friendship: each revolved too much on his own axis, as it were, and seemed to regard his companions not so much as neighbourly and friendly suns as hostile comets with wicked and dangerous orbits.

The truth is, the Lord Chamberlain had displayed an astuteness quite natural to him and in keeping with the general tenor of his ways. He had not refused to listen to the three noblemen or appeared harsh, cold, or of a bargaining character. They had supposed there might be necessity for pleading, for delicate hinting, for judicious dodging, et cetera; but

the great Biren deluded them wholesomely. He was wonderfully gracious and smiling, and got each gentleman in turn to state the nature of his errand and the burden of his petition. He listened to all with an amiable air.

Then he granted their several requests. The most benignant could scarcely have done more. He could refuse none of them, he said, with a chuckle in his capacious sleeve. They were, he knew, friends devoted to him and to Her Majesty the Empress, and their requests had found favour in her sight and would be granted.

To Count Stolemkin the Empress was pleased to say she approved of his plan to marry his son with the daughter of the late Count Puroff.

To Count Bulavin the Empress was pleased to say she approved of his plan to marry his son with the daughter of the late Count Puroff.

To Baron Frolof the Empress was pleased to say she approved of his plan to marry his son with the daughter of the late Count Puroff.

No wonder Biren had said "only three." Had there been three hundred and three he could have reeled it off. "To X, Y, Z, the Empress was pleased, etc., etc." And all would have been so simple if only the late Count Puroff had had the perspicacity to leave behind him a sufficient number of daughters. Men were thoughtless ever !

The three vicarious suitors had to appear to relish the joke, for the Lord Chamberlain was not one to suffer dullness gladly. They felt there was, however, something wanting, and the gap was filled just before they were shown out.

"The lady cannot be the husband of three men," said the Lord Chamberlain. "It would not be seemly." (The three auditors tried to smile.) "Her Majesty did not wish to choose between the claims of three of such loyal subjects, so she allows the Countess Puroff to be claimed in marriage by the son of whichever of you first secures her person. A suitable message will be given to each of you to present to the Countess as your authority. She resides, I believe, at present, in the Ukraine."

Then the Lord Chamberlain smiled.

The three friends retired, one might write it without being accused of over picturesqueness, with faces the colours of their respective breeches—green, purple and pink.

They separated without even taking the trouble to say good-bye to each other.

Biren doubtless enjoyed the jest, for he liked to throw the apple of discord amongst the Russian nobles.

## CHAPTER III

"A man should seek for himself three things—fortune, fame and a wife."

—ANON.

COUNT STOLEMKIN was not the man, while great prizes were at stake, to let others put out their hands for them and make no effort himself to snatch the spoil. As a rule, his endeavours in directions of that kind were vigorous and never to be lightly treated.

Bulavin and Frolof in the race—for race of a kind it was.

The Count cursed abundantly. And yet there was something in the affair that attracted him. It was in the nature of a gamble—a two to one chance—and all Russians are gamblers. And one thing of encouraging import was the character of the competitors. Count Stolemkin considered he could give Bulavin and Frolof a day's march in almost any decent journey and beat them. Confidence in one's self is part of the joy of life.

Stolemkin saw the need for careful planning and prudent arrangement. Some one must go, armed with the message of authority obtained from the Lord Chamberlain, to bring the Countess Puroff to her husband elect.

The Count had no intention of being himself the bearer of the message. Was he to give up the pleasures of the capital to make a journey over hideous roads, accompanied by savage discomforts, into the heart of Russia? Not if it could be avoided. And Vasili, his son, could not be the messenger. There would not only be bears and wolves in the path, but brigands and—the two other suitors. Vasili Antonovitch would not get a wife if she had to be fought for.

At the thought of these things Count Stolemkin wondered if the other two aspirants could not be stopped—dropped into the Neva, arrested for some cause or other and detained indefinitely in the fortress dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul and to the hospitality of obnoxious persons.

The Count was clearly not a pragmatic stickler for formalities when he had opponents in a great adventure. But he saw the futility of these wild ideas, for the Lord Chamberlain meant to have his little joke, so there must be a race. Stolemkin cudgelled his brains for a messenger. That was his longing—a messenger——

He must be hardy, enterprising, capable of fatigue, of good address with the tongue and the sword, trustworthy, and likely to win.

There was all Petersburg to choose from, but there was not ease in the choice as one may imagine. Nobody in the Count's entourage suggested himself as a likely person. There was Minoff his nephew, but—the Count shook his head, as if he thought Minoff would probably fail him at the critical moment.

He ran through a long catalogue of names, but A wouldn't do, and B wouldn't do, and when the



world—Stolemkin's world—appeared at its feeblest the outline of a man appeared on the horizon. Count Stolemkin held himself taut so as to be certain before he moved, and then he stood up with a look of intense satisfaction. His blue eyes, with much of the lustre sped, looked eager, and he pursed his thick lips together with a sense of relish. The vista seemed pleasant: the prospect held promise of success.

Count Stolemkin had in his mind one Louis William Gordon, a soldier of fortune, a foreigner truly, but since Peter had brought every distinguished (and undistinguished) foreigner he could into Russia, the Swedes and Dutch and French and German and English and Scotch did not find themselves without compatriots in the domain of the Tsars. And Louis William Gordon was not the only Scotchman there. Count Stolemkin scarcely paid attention to the man's nationality. He was the man for the task. There must be craft and speed to engage him, and no time lost in thrusting him forth on the momentous errand.

Count Stolemkin gave a passing thought to his friends, Bulavin and Frolof, and was almost inclined to go and tell them they would waste money and labour and blast many hopes if they seriously thought of securing the person of the Countess Puroff. Ho! Ho! Ho! The chuckle of immense satisfaction (pierced through and through with the jeering note of the shrieking victor) was Stolemkin's signal that the prize was arranged for.

Louis William Gordon was the son of a Scotch adventurer and a French countess who became

captivated with the tough soldier and threw in her lot with his, greatly to her friends' disgust and her own pecuniary loss.

Louis William's father had fought for Peter the Great at Pultowa when his little son was barely two years old, and died soon afterwards before reaping the rewards he had long toiled for. The Countess made friends with her offended relatives and gave her son the best education she could. He spoke English, Russian, French, and German, and was a dashing captain of horse at eighteen. But the occasional scrambles of war did not give him all the chances he sought, and only the favour of the Princess Elizabeth, for whom he had executed a delicate mission to the Marshal de Saxe (before that gifted adventurer became a marshal), kept him in Russia. Stolemkin knew of Gordon's ability and his desire for the chance of distinguished employment, also of his impecuniosity. So, intent on making arrangements for the capture of the Countess Puroff, the Count strode out into the atrocious streets of St. Petersburg to search for Louis William Gordon.

The task was not so difficult or arduous as it might be imagined. Certainly the Russian capital was not clean either in street or savour, and the frequent calls (Mr. Gordon was no respecter of places, so long as he got the company and the pleasure he desired) made the quest long. But Count Stolemkin made light of difficulties when the prize that beckoned was so rich and rare. He went from place to place with the patience of the successful searcher. He accosted all English and Scotch that he knew, in the hope they would be able to tell him

of the whereabouts of their compatriot. After all, he *had* to be found, or some one else must be chosen to take his place, and there was always a chance that Bulavin or Frolof by a freak of Fate might find a man of Gordon's equal and dispatch him without loss of time.

Count Stolemkin was worried with thoughts like these and felt tempted to curse. He wandered towards the Neva, for these odd foreigners had a liking for the salt water and the ships, and passed a workyard established by Peter the Great where ships were being most admirably put together, but of new and unseasoned timber—the egregious deathtraps of a misguided zeal! The roads were wretched. Tree trunks flung down provided a hard substance, and then one exhausted its virtue.

In an inn that was frequently patronized by travellers from a distance, Count Stolemkin at last found the object of his search.

Louis William Gordon was speaking in the tongue of his father with a braw Scotch skipper from Edinburgh. At the freshened sight of him Count Stolemkin felt satisfied. If this man could not bring the Countess Puroff to be wedded to his son Vasili, who could?

Gordon's bright complexion was a suggestion to hope. His appearance was very comforting. He was about six feet two inches in height and most admirably proportioned, with a look of ease and magnificence. Strength seemed his portion; and there was pleasantness in his face, from the lips ready for a joke (or kisses) to the light of adventure in the moderate-sized—but very bright—brown



eyes. He was clean-shaven save for a moustache, and his hair was a curly brown.

The Count greeted him joyously: the occasion was worth it. And Louis William, as became the offspring of a Scotch father and French mother, noted the effusiveness at once, and almost uttered a prayer for the great adventure.

In less than five minutes he got an outline of what was required and his bright eyes twinkled. He saw himself in wild Russia bringing the lady to the capital, and the reward——?

“It would be handsome,” said the Count.

“Um—um,” said Gordon with an astute gleam in his eye, speaking the language of definiteness.

The Count was not intent on bargaining, for a few roubles more or less were of no consequence in comparison with the great prize. And Gordon, for all his seeming desire to fix the reward, was mostly keen on knowing that he would not be stinted on the journey.

“Bring the little lady to St. Petersburg,” he said. “What did you say her name was?”

“Countess Puroff.”

“I knew her father: he fought under mine at Pultowa. And it is his daughter?” Gordon looked at Stolemkin with an inviting curiosity, for the Count’s outline had been merely an outline. It was desirable to bring the Countess Puroff to the capital, and it was most expedient that she be brought speedily, and, above all, that she be brought by Louis William Gordon to Count Stolemkin.

Clearly, the average man’s curiosity might have

been awakened. Gordon felt somehow that he was entitled to a few more details, for the hint that expense was not to be considered but haste was, gave food for speculation.

But Stolemkin had moved in courts as well as in camps and knew the value of the unspoken word. He never told all when half would serve. Roubles, on occasions, were much cheaper than words. A still tongue made a peaceful sleep, while the babbler dwelt ever beside the block. He could frame sentences like these quite handily, but he was best at home with the sentiment—the essence of the business—and was not so keen on the phraseology. But here he felt that perhaps, after all, a little telling would be not only advantageous but essential. And when the advantageous combines with the essential the valleys are filled and the rough places made smooth.

So Stolemkin spoke, feeling his way, as it were.

“Yes, his daughter.”

“Um!” Gordon’s eyes said. “Go on: there must be more to tell.”

“The fact is, but this is not for other ears.”

Gordon nodded.

“She is to be my son’s wife.”

“I congratulate you, Count.”

The Chancellor’s authority was produced. Gordon read it with more care than he was wont to cast on the written word when the spoken had told him the context. “Her Majesty was pleased to give her consent to the marriage of——” and so on.

There still seemed to be something lacking. Why

this searching out of him, Louis William Gordon, to fetch the lady? It seemed odd—a little out of the common——

“And I am to fetch her to her husband then?” he said.

“Yes; that is the business.”

“Will she come willingly?”

“I think so,” said Stolemkin. He produced another paper signed by the Lord Chamberlain bidding the Countess Puroff accompany the bearer to St. Petersburg. (There were two others of these as there were two others of the “Consents,” only in the latter other names were mentioned). “That you will show to the Countess.”

Gordon took the document.

“When would you like me to start?”

“At once. The sooner the better. The reward is yours if you bring the Countess safe to me in St. Petersburg——”

“I understand.”

The Count thought a warning advisable.

“Be careful as well as speedy. I have reason to think—at least, I believe it is possible there may be attempts made to seize the person of the Countess: frustrate them. You may use any efforts—legitimate, of course.”

“Legitimate?” Gordon repeated the word with a light of wonder on it.

The Count didn’t laugh, but his smile was attractive. It suggested a broad interpretation.

“Any efforts,” he repeated, that will not be to your hurt or the lady’s.”

Gordon nodded understandingly.

"You believe," he said, "there will be attempts?"

"Yes, I believe so. That is why I ask you to lose no time and be prudent: and why I have chosen you. I want some one whom I can trust, some one who will not be beaten when his honour and ability are at stake."

The Count was, one perceives, not stupid in his dealings with men.

Gordon, who was usually fluent with both men and women, was now comparatively silent. He felt (while he swallowed the flattery) that something in the scheme was hidden. But he smiled and bowed. So far as he envisaged the affair, his rôle seemed clear, and, as a rule, he found it almost enough to know what he had to do: though he always realized the advantage he got from knowing what the others had in view.

Still, for him to bring a youthful Countess for a bride to St. Petersburg was a congenial task, and his eye brightened at the thought of it. What did it matter that this Count Stolemkin was a rusé villain, up to ways dark and unseemly, that he was known for cruelties and trickeries? Gordon felt he was nothing in the business. The great thing was the adventure. An expedition with flying horses and yelling postboys, through a country vast, wild, full of the unexpected, and no stint of danger and peril to limb and life, with a fine reward for enticement and blood at its liveliest during the pursuit for present guerdon.

Stolemkin, seeing he had his man, was lavish in preparations and all the needs of the journey.

He also added a warning note.

"With the authority you have," he said, "the Countess must come with you to St. Petersburg, but you need not mention the marriage."

"I must not, or need not?"

Count Stolemkin hesitated.

"I have told you," he said, "so that you may understand; but for a woman that is not always necessary. She will learn all in St. Petersburg, and—you have the authority to bring her, so I trust to your discretion."

Gordon nodded.

For a moment or two he was thoughtful. He conned the situation: he was to fetch a woman to be married who clearly had no idea that her husband had been chosen for her. There was romance here, perhaps devilry, perhaps—but he had travelled widely and seen much. Women were married every day like this. And what did it matter? Some were happy and some were not, and that was the case with all husbands and wives. The romantic note hidden in the adventure made it all the more alluring, and perhaps Stolemkin's son was not like his father. If he were—well, there might be more adventures and more romance in St. Petersburg afterwards.

It was a bright world after all!

He kept these thoughts to himself.

"You will lose no time?" said the Count, who had been watching him closely and understood little. Beer, brandy and blood won't of necessity let a man see in the heart of another. Count Stolemkin never saw fairies in the forests, though he could kill wolves.



"I will prepare at once," said Gordon.

He said good-bye to his friend the Scottish captain and said he was going to fetch a gleam of sunshine for the Prince of Darkness.

The man from Edinburgh laughed.

"Mon, Louis, it's a mad idea! Bottlin' sunshine is ower muckle deefficult, an' the Prince o' Darkness is a damned poor master."

Louis winked. It was as if he said sunshine was very much in his line and the Prince of Darkness not to be feared.

"If I had your speerit," said the other, almost sighing.

"You might have my pocket, too," rejoined Louis.

The man from Edinburgh looked frightened and then laughed. He continued laughing!



## CHAPTER IV

"Her virtues, graced with external gifts,  
Do breed love's settled passions in my heart."

—*Henry VI.*

THE Count was pleased beyond his expectation on seeing his messenger go forth. There was about Gordon an air that bred confidence, and Stolemkin sniffed it to his comfort.

Louis in his kибitka (with a feather bed at the bottom) was snug and full of the promise of gladness. He took with him two trusty men for company and service in times of meals and mauls, and set out drawn by eight horses, four abreast.

The Count brought his son to see Gordon go on his errand.

"He will come back with your wife," said the calculating father to the frail and fearful son.

Vasili Antonovitch looked with staring eyes, whose pupils got bigger and less. He looked fearfully anxious.

"I may not like her," he muttered.

His father thrust him away, swearing.

"May not like her," he repeated, with an abundant emphasis. What was the present generation coming to?

The kибitka, a pile of hay behind, postillions,

dressed in a coarse drugget, on the off horses, went away with a dash. The postillions had no method in their driving: merely humour. They made the horses gallop when they chose: they made them walk for a similar reason. So they sometimes galloped up hills and walked down; they dashed over rough roads and crawled over smooth, and had no notion that they did anything but God's will and the pleasure of the great person in the carriage. That is how ignorance wastes life. In some way or other most of us insist on running up the hills and crawling down.

The Countess Puroff, so Count Stolemkin had discovered, was at this time living at her castle near Buof, so Gordon had to travel through Novgorod, Tver, Moscow and Tula.

He carried a great store of provisions with him and drove day and night as much as he could. It was the custom at that time, for hotels were few and poor, and even the madness of postboys was to be endured more easily than the doubtful food and certain discomfort of the wayside inn.

Gordon got his adventures on the road. He was dashed over a rickety wooden bridge with no rail, and one wheel had a suicidal look at the water below and was then dragged incontinent on to the bank. Twice the kibitka went in a ditch and Louis came forth with anathemas on his tongue and a good stout whip in his hand. It certainly was discomforting. At post houses, too, there were lazy folk and disobliging folk, and a biting tongue and cutting lash accomplished even less there than the sight of the paper signed by the all-powerful Biren.

There were also bears on the road and wolves in the forest, and twice Gordon was warned of robbers. They had been but a short time before to the village and flogged a rich merchant to get money, and nobody had dared to interfere.

Louis William Gordon was too sensible to rush into danger for danger's sake, and he avoided robbers for his own. So the incidents were mostly accidents and generally without savour or the warming of the heart : and it was with gladness that he heard the postboy yelling "*Davai ! Davai !*" Horses ! Horses ! for the last time before he arrived at the castle of the Countess Puroff.

"Here we are, Johan Paulovitch," he said to one of his two companions (Stephen Gregorovitch was the other). "Here comes to an end for the present the genial idiocy of postillion and postman."

"For the present," said Johan Paulovitch.

"Thank God ! even for the present," said Stephen Gregorovitch, who liked comforts, and caught sight of the castle on the hill.

It was not a feudal building, suggestive of sieges and defiance, but a big rambling structure with the lower part constructed of brick and the upper of wood.

The postboys dashed the horses towards the house with frantic haste, as if this was the last chance for a gallop, and the stolid peasants who saw bared their heads and bent them in reverence.

Gordon felt in better humour. This was far pleasanter than swearing at blunderers. The house suggested wealth. There were treasures of gold and silver that made it alluring to the covetous

and agreeable to most. Neither was it spoiled by a mixture—a bad mixture of east and west. It was Russian and west so far as furnishings went.

Then the Countess appeared, backed by a man, a fine, stout, solid creature, towering even higher than Gordon, with devotion tattooed on his soul—you could read the lettering through his eyes.

But the big man was overcast by the maid. He might have been a big tree, or a high wall, or a castle even, but she was a glorious ray of sunlight. She had a smile that might have been considered exuberant in another, but with her was just and beautiful.

Gordon had not time to say that he came to her as a messenger with authority from the Lord Chamberlain, before she welcomed him as a guest and hoped he would make her house his home for as long as it pleased him.

“The air of a queen because she has never been to a court,” said Gordon to himself.

He was elaborate, not overdoing it, but he felt homagewards. He bowed gracefully and thanked her with charm. For the moment he kept silent over his errand. It seemed almost cruel to thrust on her the news that she was to go to St. Petersburg to be married to the son of Count Stolemkin. Gordon, away from Stolemkin and near to Melania Nicholovna, Countess Puroff, took quite another view of his mission. The Countess seemed to deserve happiness: she conferred it, that was evident.

After they had drunk the wine of hospitality, Gordon began to remind himself that he had a mission not a licence. It was not his part to disport himself at his ease in this place, but to take the lady to St.

Petersburg. Besides, there might be danger in delay, for there were others on errands similar to his own. But he looked at her as she talked and walked, and wondered if he did right.

"You are journeying far?" she asked, with a smile.

Gordon hesitated a moment. The voice and the smile were too good to be intruded upon by *his* doings. But it had to be.

"Only so far as I have come, Countess."

"And you have come far?"

"From St. Petersburg."

Her eyes, violet blue with depths and tales in them, looked wonder and admiration.

"From St. Petersburg," she repeated. "I have never been since I was a child. My father"—her face took on a curtain of sorrow for a brief moment, but the beautiful life in her gently put the curtain aside—"preferred I should be in the country."

"But now——" said Gordon, and he hesitated.

"I may go some day," she said.

"That, I think," he replied, "is true. I have come to take you there."

It was magnificent surprise and quite worth the causing. She ceased to smile, looked as if to say, "What! To take me there—me—to St. Petersburg?"

There were heaps of suggestions in her eyes, and her mouth gently opened up and framed—

"Oh!"

"Quite true, Countess."

"Is that what you have come for?" she asked with surprise still on her face.



"It is : that is my errand."

"I cannot understand," she said, with a winning innocence.

Then Belof, the man in whom she now put all her trust, her steward, adviser, major-domo and general guide, with red hair all over his head and face—nearly, leaned forward with a suspicious air.

"His authority, Melania Nicholovna—ask him for his authority."

She hesitated. She felt that such a question implied doubt, and she was innocent enough to believe the improbable as well as the probable. As for doubting the gallant gentleman who spoke with her—impossible !

Gordon was discreet. He drew forth his authority, and the name of the Lord Chancellor awed both the Countess and Belof. The Countess looked more serious. (Probably Belof also felt more serious, though he could not betray more.)

"Why?" the lady asked, with a gentle, confident air.

"At the Court, Countess—you know—they are always wanting something. They may just desire to make your acquaintance, to learn what the people are like in this part of the world. They have lots of reasons of their own."

She fixed him with those violet eyes.

"And did they not tell one of them to you?"

Gordon had not spoken with conviction. He was beginning to dislike his errand. To take a lily like this to St. Petersburg and hand her over to the son of Stolemkin. He found it very difficult to speak with sincerity.



“What they told me, Countess,” he replied, “was to make haste here and make haste back, to protect you from harm and bring you safe to St. Petersburg.”

The last two instructions carried him over the fence. There was a neat offer of service as well as a duty in them: there was honour and responsibility and may be danger laid on this gentleman's shoulders. To catechize him further was curiosity carried to unkindness.

Belof considered the hesitation weak and his suspicions strong.

“I am grateful to you,” said the Countess. “It is most kind of you to do me this service.”

“Countess, it is I who receive the kindness in being allowed to be your most obedient servant.”

She fluttered with delight.

“Oh!” was all she said, but she shook her head as much as to say, “That is too beautiful for me to attempt to copy.”

“I do not know your name?”

“Gordon—Louis William Gordon, Louis Alexandrovitch, if you prefer it, and unfalteringly at your service.”

“Louis Alexandrovitch.” She said it prettily. “I am Melania Nicholovna, and—and I thank you for your service.”

They both bowed gracefully. Also, the reader will remark, they called each other by their Christian names, and the Christian names of their fathers with son added on for Gordon and daughter for the Countess's. That was and is the Russian custom.

"Louis Alexandrovitch, when would you like me to start?" she asked.

"At once—as soon as possible, Melania Nicholovna. My instructions on that point were precise."

He was thinking now of the two other obedient servants who might arrive at any moment, and he had no disposition now to surrender his charge to any interloper. On the road there was a chance to get across a horse with her in case of necessity. In the house there were too many doors and windows.

"At once." She turned to Belof. "Did you hear that? I am to go to St. Petersburg at once with this gentleman."

"Yes, Melania Nicholovna." He looked as if he would like to add, "And I don't think much of the idea."

"Then I shall have to get ready at once?"

"It would be best," said Gordon.

She turned to the man with the red hair.

"Paul Stephanovitch, see that everything is got ready for me at once." She had authority in her somehow—in her blood and upbringing, for this big man, who was accustomed to guide and advise her as much as possible, clearly disliked the projected journey, yet he turned as she spoke.

"Yes, Melania Nicholovna," he said, and strode away to do his duty.

The Countess then excused herself and left Gordon to return to his two companions. But he did not join Nickoff and Pendeff at once. He wondered at his errand. He had set out gaily enough, for adventures of this kind were sunlight and joy to him. And one woman was not so different from

another woman. Not so very. But now, this violet-eyed slip of a girl, with her mass of tinted auburn hair that was plaited round and round because of its length, and her winning confidence and captivating innocence, appealed to him as something different from all other women on earth—at least, that he had seen and known. And to take her to Stolemkin, to be handed over like a bottle of wine or the roe of a sturgeon——

And yet she would probably fare no better in the hands of the others who came, all greedy with greed, reeking of spoil, caring nothing for the real treasure——

Gordon wondered what was the matter with him that he bothered like this over a girl with violet eyes and auburn hair.

“Louis Alexandrovitch.” Hadn’t she said it prettily?

But this was preposterous, sentimental, womanish silliness! Gordon strode out to find his two companions and to see that all was got ready for the journey. He had a part to play, not clouds to wander in.

Nickoff and Pendeff had apparently been hospitably entertained. They were in the best of humours and looked jovial.

Nickoff held out a goblet.

“Praised be the Saints in Heaven—here is a safe journey back, Louis Alexandrovitch.” He drank.

“Don’t drink too often to the Saints in Heaven, Johan Paulovitch,” replied Gordon. “They don’t appreciate that kind of thing, and you will want a clear head to go back on the return journey.”

"Do we start at once?" Pendeff asked.

"We do."

"The Saints in Heaven be—no, that will scarcely do. And I had hoped for decent bed and board for two days and nights at least. At once; what does that mean?"

"It means, Stephen Gregorovitch, that as soon as Her Excellency, the Countess Puroff" (he wanted to add, "Bless her!" but didn't; he paused all the same), "is ready, we too shall be ready."

"Then I'll pray to the Saints she may take an ordinary woman's time in getting ready for a long journey."

"The Countess is not an ordinary woman," said Louis very quickly.

Pendeff slowly filled his goblet and raised it.

"Then I hope she will take an extraordinary woman's time," he said, and drained his goblet with gusto.

"Amen to that," said Nickoff.

"If you are not quite sober and quite ready when I am, my friends," said Gordon with a bright look in his eye, "something extraordinary will happen to you," and he went out to sit by himself near a clump of trees, for he felt in an uncommon mood.

The country was not beautiful; but there was an atmosphere of bigness about the place. They were just on the border-line of the black land and the arable steppes. Here, according to Herodotus, the Scythians lived by agriculture and Athens drew her grain. In this famed black land the richest harvests can be produced without manure, though

Ignorance can blight Nature as Stupidity can numb the brain.

Where the Countess lived there were trees—the fir and the birch—in plenty. A gentle wind blew from the south and a resinous scent came to Gordon's nostrils as he sat looking across the vast steppe. The vegetation in parts, where the land was not tilled, grew luxuriantly wild to a height of six or seven feet. It tossed a green mane to the wind and gave back the challenge of the sun. Spring was here. In the autumn all would be brown and parched: but now there was promise everywhere.

Gordon looked and wondered. Countess Puroff in this vast country, with big, mighty forces round her, and as happy as a singing bird in a forest where the snake and the lion lived and lusted. A silver birch in a forest of oak.

Those violet eyes and that fresh cheek—that innocent smile—— Gordon got up and wandered back towards the house. He had never been so disturbed by womankind before. The hussies, the cozeners, the black-eyed, blue-eyed, brown-eyed beauties whom he had ogled and kissed, made no impression on him like this slip of a girl.

"God in Heaven! I am in love with the girl!" he said to himself. "In love with her. And I am taking her to be the wife of another man."

He shook himself—metaphorically. Literally, he moved quickly and strode away, anywhere to be alone. He felt it was impossible that he was in love at last. And so speedily, too. As if he had toppled over a bridge while looking at the water. But such water—violet, with forests all round; trees of a



gorgeous fancy framed with the most delicate auburn blossom that one could fancy——

Violet water ! Did anybody ever hear such nonsense ? And auburn blossom ?

He tried swearing. It relieved him for a moment, just as movement did, but it did not wear well. He caught himself sighing, and that seemed proof tremendous.

He faced the matter seriously. Was he really and truly in love with the Countess Puroff ? Melania Nicholovna. He repeated the words with a joyous relish. He found he couldn't answer a straightforward question without thinking of the form and features of a maiden he had only just seen, who would, if she were beside him, reach to about there——no, there——

He doubled up his fists and walked briskly in another direction. One fact, at least, was clear : he was behaving in a most uncommon fashion, and when he had a serious mission before him antics of such irresponsibility were out of place. He screwed himself up and walked back towards the house. He was met by a servant.

" Her Excellency was hurrying forward all her preparations and would be ready to start at dawn."

At dawn ! It was not a clear, fixed, matter-of-fact period, unemotional and prosaic, but one charged with poetry. " At dawn." It sounded now like something most promising. It was the end of night : the black figure had gone and the birth of a new day rose on the horizon. It was the hour Nature woke and the lazy earth turned over in its



bed, rubbed its eyes and then said, "Now things will be different."

"The Saints preserve me!" said Gordon to himself. "I am indeed growing bletherish. This is the way of children, of babes, milk-drinkers and femininity in general. I, Louis William Gordon, to be mooning like a blighted dove, driven about like a sickly, unmuzzled poet—paf!"

He strode back to his two companions, quickly, resolutely, and with vigour.

"We leave at dawn," he said. "See you are ready."

They looked up drowsily and nodded. They had much to do before then and turned at once to sleep.

Gordon followed their example and dreamt of the sun rising, only it had violet eyes and a superb aureola of auburn hair. A preposterous dream.

## CHAPTER V

“Affliction is enamour’d of thy parts,  
And thou art wedded to calamity.”

—*Romeo and Juliet.*

**B**EFORE the dawn there was hurrying and scurrying. Men came out with parcels and boxes and packed them on a carriage which was to follow the Countess. Some of the men had lanterns, and some carried the lighted pine torches of the peasants, who could not generally afford candles. These men were dressed in a coarse robe of drugget which reached below the knee and was bound round the waist with a sash. The linen of the trousers was thick and coarse, and for stockings they wrapped a woollen cloth round their legs, and fastened them with strips of flexible bark—the material of which their sandals were made.

Night seemed to be passing lazily. The air clung to its children. No breeze came in madness or mirth to disturb or freshen. Tree and shrub, and leaf even, were still as if Rest held them, and the air did its best to make no disturbance. Into the greyness there stole some silver gleams, and the clouds moved with a slow majesty as if they knew their place and the manner of homage making to the sun.

"We shall soon be ready," said Melania Nicholovna to Gordon as they stood together watching the men carry and fasten. She was dressed in a robe of rose-coloured silk, tied round the waist with a sash. The sleeves were white, and there were enamel buttons of oriental design on the dress. She had on a round cap of sable, and there were furs for her in case she felt the cold.

"I hope we shall have a pleasant journey," said Gordon.

"Is there need for haste?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Why am I suddenly summoned to the capital? It is strange, Louis Alexandrovitch. Have you no idea of the reason that calls me?"

Pestilential question!

Gordon looked diplomatic—as well as a pair of violet eyes would let him.

"It is difficult to guess sometimes the motives of the powerful, Melania Nicholovna, and occasionally dangerous. I am a discreet man. For me it is enough to obey orders; just as I allow no one to question mine. You—you are a great person, Countess."

She sighed.

"A great person. I have known the great become very small. And none of them seemed able to command happiness. Don't you think happiness is better than greatness?"

"Greatness is to happiness as one of those pine torches to the sun. It takes some labour to get that, and the light and the heat give us some satisfaction; but the sun, which comes unsought and

unasked for, will warm more and light more. If you hunt for happiness you won't get it; and if you strive for greatness you will assuredly miss happiness."

"That is not very encouraging, Louis Alexandrovitch."

"The truth doesn't bother with encouragements or discouragements, dear lady. You take it as you find it."

"From which you would have me infer that I must go to St. Petersburg and ask no questions."

"It is not a bad way, Melania Nicholovna."

"You mean to St. Petersburg, or to happiness?"

"The Saints howl at St. Petersburg—I meant happiness. Do what you are told if that's your business and take the nice things the Good God provides. There's a chance of happiness. Everything else can go to—St. Petersburg."

"I wonder," she said after a pause, "if you are a good guide." She had a look of doubt.

"That, Melania Nicholovna, you shall tell me when you get to St. Petersburg," he replied.

He winced in mind as he thought of that arrival in the capital, for it meant, of course, handing over the Countess to the son of Stolemkin.

She looked quite grave as she said—

"I trust you, Louis Alexandrovitch."

It was meant for comfort, but it came ironically.

"I am honoured," he said, almost bitterly, for he was beginning to dislike his job more and more. Had the Countess been a grisly creature or merely somewhat grizzled he might have gone with a gay and gladsome heart back to the calculating Stolem-

kin : but this sweet innocent ! And she thanked him and trusted him !

But Belof was not like his mistress. He seemed to wonder and wonder and wonder what that man meant who would take his mistress to St. Petersburg. He certainly did not trust him. Why did he not tell why he came and took Melania Nicholovna to the capital ? What a pity there was a woman on the throne ! One, too, who let the cursed German do so much. The peasants said the crops would not grow because a woman ruled, and they prayed to Peter to come back and drive Biren the German away.

But Belof was able to do nothing save watch and wonder. The Countess gave him plenty of orders, and he listened to them all and tried to watch Gordon at the same time. And finally all was ready. The Countess with her woman got into the carriage—a kibitka like Gordon's with a feather bed at the bottom (two, to be accurate)—the postboys mounted, Gordon got in his carriage, the peasants who were about went on their knees, and the priest, who had come in haste, uttered a prayer for the safety of the Countess, and the calvalcade—including the carriages—went on the road towards the capital—and adventure.

Gordon, at first, had decided to go alone in his kibitka : then he changed his mind. That was his humour for the moment. He took Nickoff and Pendeff in the carriage with him. If he felt angry they would be handy to kick : if he wanted conversation they would be useful.

He did not kick, so he was not ill-humoured (which



was commendable since Melania Nicholovna was now not to be seen).

"I thought," said Nickoff, "that we were to have excitements, blood-stirring moments, prayers to the Saints in times of danger, and a great catalogue of fearsome scrapes and scapes. This," he nodded contemptuously, "is more like a pious and not unpleasant pilgrimage."

"Do you complain?" asked Gordon.

"Say No," entreated Pendeff. "I don't like to annoy Providence. I knew a man once who laughed at danger, and he had his head split in two with a dubine in Moscow only half an hour afterwards."

"Directed by Providence because he boasted, eh?"

"I don't know. I never catechize Providence. I don't really understand: but I give you the story, which is true."

"And if he had not boasted you think the playful creature who flung the cudgel would not have hit your friend? Hit another man, eh? Or missed altogether because at that time nobody happened to boast? Providence seemingly having set on that rough in Moscow to hurl a dubine at men who laughed at danger."

Nickoff laughed. Gordon was seemingly in a teasing mood (recognizable symptom!), but Pendeff shook his head.

"I don't know. I don't catechize Providence: but what I tell you is true——"

Nickoff laughed more loudly than before: an annoying cachinnation. Pendeff went red. Gordon shook his head and said—



"If you were not lusty with the sword and a man to stand by at all times and in all weathers, Stephen Gregorovitch, I would not have chosen you to come with me. I like brightness, sunlight, grace, delicacy, and the sweetest Saints in Heaven would lure me in vain to give you those qualities. You have the humour of the elephant : it is gigantic. Your foot comes down on pleasantness with a crash crescendo. Praised be the Saints ! You are not my fool. You ought to be a jester at the Court, Stephen Gregorovitch. Anna Ivanovna would appreciate you as a jester. Your *bons mots* about Providence and the man in Moscow would have cured the belly ache of half the Court and shocked the Archimandrite into reverence."

Gordon laughed. He was, as we may observe, in a gay humour.

"What is it ? " asked Pendeff, a little surprised, and he looked at Nickoff for elucidation. Gordon's gaiety was unexpected.

Nickoff winked. He attempted to hum—

"Her hair was the red of the sunset,  
Her eyes were the sea's deep blue."

Gordon glared so steadily that Nickoff slowly hummed nothing more coherent. He felt it would be a useless waste of bravado. Pendeff was still in the dark. He looked from one to the other with a curiously inquiring expression.

"I do not understand," he said, shaking his head.

One might judge from his attitude and receptivity that he would stand and die at his post and never

leave a friend. This kind of virtue does not make us chuckle, and so nowadays such a man is voted a very dull creature. The world is at the feet of the laughter-makers, and yet it is probably the sober folk who keep it going. Pendeff was regarded as a boor except in certain critical hours, and then he became the one person of importance. Gordon fortunately understood him ; and perception is a good share of good living.

"It's just as well you don't," he said to Nickoff in reply to his last remark, and then somehow there stole Silence with a warning finger into the carriage.

Nickoff was discreet. Gordon was wondering and thinking (we know, if we are only moderately discerning, about *whom* he was thinking), and Pendeff was hoping those fools of postboys would drive so that there would be less jolting.

They drove now within sight of great fields of mullet and rye, now by a thick forest of fir and birch, with sentinels of elm and maple that seemed to have pushed forward from the south. They crossed rivers over strange bridges and changed horses at the posting stations.

Here Gordon saw the Countess again, inquired after her comfort, reaped her smile and thanks, and then talked so that poor Pendeff could make neither head nor tail of the conversation.

It was when they were passing along a road cut through a forest that the crash came. Gordon somehow had felt a sense of incident and was holding his pistol in his hand when there burst from trees on either side of them and in front a body of weirdly-dressed creatures, wild, ferocious, des-

perate and daring. They did not stop to parley. They shot bang! bang! They shouted loudly as they shot and then leapt at the horses and then at the carriages.

There were shrieks and cries from the postboys; the horses plunged and reared, generally for the last time as the assailants at once shot them to stop further progress.

The Countess and her woman screamed for help.

"Come out here!" shouted Gordon, and with pistol and sword he leapt out of the carriage. Fury was in his face. Was it because of a woman's cry of distress?

He fired at once and a man fell. He turned to look in the direction of the Countess and shouted, "This way" to Nickoff and Pendeff who were beside him.

They dashed towards the figure in the rose and white and hurled themselves into the group of men there with a charge superb. Gordon's sword went home twice with a sickly swiftness. His other pistol emptied a saddle. He was at the Countess's side, and she gave a cry as if she would fling herself in his arms, when he was hit over the head with the butt of a musket and dropped in a pitiable heap at her feet.

She screamed and fell beside him, weeping and praying.

Nickoff and Pendeff were cut and bleeding and dropped from sheer weight of numbers. What were half a dozen among so many?

The Countess's men, who were behind her, had been taken unawares, and received the first shots of

the attackers. Two were dead, three were dying, and galloping hoofs told the tale of the others.

Voices rude, coarse and harsh shouted notes of victory and satisfaction. Some swore over cuts and thrusts and bullets. But there was general content over the capture. The Countess was unhurt and so was the maid. One of the bandits took her woman by the arm and squeezed her. Two or three of them near laughed at something he said and she looked like a rabbit before a serpent. Then she fell at her mistress's feet shaking like a cloth in a wind.

The sun had risen and the day was already tough. The thick forest, however, prevented the dancing of the shadows, and the bandits, who were unhurt, moved here and there like men who thoroughly understood their business. A man in authority ordered them about with ease and a commendable command. The dead were buried; the wounded were placed in the carriages.

The Countess looked at Gordon on the ground and stroked his face and then tried to staunch the wound on his head, and though the sight of the matted locks with their dark red entwining was disturbing to her, she leaned over him tenderly and tried to do her best.

The chief touched her on the shoulder.

"Get into the carriage," he said.

"He is wounded," she said with a tear in her voice. "So wounded. Will you see to him?"

"You first, madam. To the carriage, please."

The tone was authoritative. She looked up disdainfully, then rose.

"If you do not attend to him, you will suffer for it," she said.

A faint smile—very faint—stole for an instant over his face. Threatened by this tender woman—a girl even—and he was not afraid of the soldiers of the Empress! It is one of the commonest of offences to exaggerate our own importance and underestimate the power of others. No wonder he had an inclination to smile. He nodded to two men and pointed to the Countess and the carriage. He did not speak. He was evidently a man who believed in deeds more than words, and those people always do things that count—either bad or good. It is the uncertainty there that is so unsettling.

"How dare you!" she began. But she turned to look at Gordon again, for he had moved and groaned. She had not time to attend to him, for the two men took her by the arms and began to drag her towards the carriage. She looked proudly indignant. She, who had wielded almost absolute power over her serfs, felt this tremendously. Her blood rushed wildly at the insulting touch. But she could find nothing to say and merely looked fiercely at the chief again. He seemed to be an understanding man.

"Go easily," he said quietly to her, showing no emotion.

She was calmed, perhaps by his calmness: emotions are as infectious as fevers. She looked assailed by a bewildering storm of thoughts, that somehow were incoherent and yet touched certain definite pictures of apprehension in her mind. She was buffeted by her own feelings now and walked almost



willingly if unsteadily towards the carriage. Her woman, whiter than herself, held her.

"What is it, Marie?" muttered the Countess.

But Marie was too frightened.

"I do not know, Melania Nicholovna," and she burst into tears.

The Countess felt steadied: her woman's fear had its effect. She clenched her hands lightly for a moment, then crossed herself and prayed—prayed not only for a vague help, but also for the poor man who was so sore hurt, Louis William Gordon, Louis Alexandrovitch.

The chief of the bandits nodded and the procession went on its way, leaving precious little mark behind of the wretched but common tragedy.

The reader need not be surprised at this daring of the robber band. At that time—the reign of the Empress Anne—these bands were so daring that they resisted the regular troops, they captured ships on the Volga, and terrorized the people in the places where they made a descent. Two or three brigands had tortured a man before the whole village, so cowed were these miserable creatures when the robbers appeared. If people are treated as slaves they will behave like them. It doesn't do to treat people like angels, all the same. Extremes are only for the very great or the very little.

Gordon, Nickoff and Pendeff were *hors de combat*. They lay helpless and badly wounded in the carriages. The brigands who were wounded wrapped up their wounds, cursed their foes, and then thought of the spoil. The little lady looked to be one who had great possessions and her person was probably



a capture of value. So there was satisfaction in the camp of the Philistines.

The little lady was now doing her best to envisage the situation. A few nights ago she was living comfortably on her estate with her word law and none to gainsay her wish. She had suddenly been summoned to St. Petersburg, and while on the way—the blood ran warm now—she saw Louis William Gordon lying on the ground with matted hair and a pale face. . . . What were these men? Into whose hands had they fallen? Were they just robbers? What would they do? She was not comfortable.

“Marie.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“What are these people?” She whispered it. Marie crossed herself.

“They are awful, my lady, awful. Oh! I am afraid——”

“Awful what?”

“Robbers,” whispered the terrified maid.

After a pause the mistress said—

“Will they kill us, or just rob?”

The maid who had heard the jest of a bandit hoped it would be “just rob,” but she feared it would be more.

“I don’t know, my lady,” she whimpered.

“Don’t cry, you goose,” said the Countess, and she fell to thinking of Gordon’s poor face. Would they kill him? Was he already dead? . . .

The procession went on without stopping, for these robbers were hardy men who could go long without food or rest when need arose. They made for their lair in a corner of the forest, where they

had their wooden huts and stables, and their women waited. The bear and the wolf were glad to leave this little nook untroubled and human beings rarely ventured twice.

When the band arrived there the women came out to welcome and mourn. That scene was common in that quarter. The booty was then collected by experienced hands and the prisoners were kept in the meanwhile in their carriages.

The chief was joined by a woman of fine figure and healthy look. She was young, about twenty, but appeared older.

"Good, Juri?" she said.

"Yes, sister."

"Not hurt?"

"No."

She turned away to see to other matters.

The chief was young too, not more than twenty-four or twenty-five, but there was such resolution in his face that Age seemed to touch him with no carefulness. He was indifferent to all, save his purpose. The men about were generally older, though some were younger. They were of all classes, *tchins* and nobles, deserters from the army, unfrocked priests, cossacks, and peasants who had fled from brutality to brigandage. There were even noble ladies in the colony.

The chief, Juri Glebof, called "Captain" by his followers, beckoned one of his men to him.

"What about the prisoners?"

"The women are unhurt, Captain: the men are all unconscious."

"Bring the women here."

The Countess, looking very much out of place in that motley band, came proudly to the Captain, followed meekly by her maid.

Glebof looked at her critically. Morals did not exist for most of these men ; but happily Glebof was different. He had a purpose in life, perhaps a vague one and not a nice one, but it kept him from wandering too much to the right hand or to the left.

He was struck by her fresh, *pure* appearance. Few of his captures had that.

"Your name, my lady?" he said courteously.

She hesitated. Pride is very wilful, and can be very audacious in a pretty woman.

"Why should I tell you?" she said haughtily.

"Because it would be the best thing for you to do," he said coldly, but with such a ring in his voice that she almost feared. Marie trembled.

The Countess looked at the speaker : but her violet eyes were not made for bending others.

"I am the Countess Puroff," she said quietly, with as much dignity as any lady under compulsion could have shown.

Glebof bowed.

"You have doubtless jewels with you?"

She hesitated a moment : but the man spoke so authoritatively and looked so unbendable that she said after a pause—

"Yes."

"Please give them up when asked for, without any hesitation. It will be best. These men—are they yours?"

"No."

"Friends?"

"I—I don't think you should question me about them."

"You need not, Countess, think why I do things. It is unnecessary."

"How dare you speak to me like that?" she blazed out, and the next instant saw the futility of the emotion and the speech. The Captain's piercing eyes and resolute expression—he had no need for the emphasis which is the trumpet of the weak—came to her understanding.

There was a slight pause again and it was she who showed defeat.

"Friends?" he repeated.

"I—I hope so. I have not known them long. They are conducting me to St. Petersburg. And, sir, will you see they are attended to, for they are grievously hurt."

Now her eyes were eloquent of feeling: this was where they shone.

He nodded.

"You need not be anxious. If they are useful to us they may live, if not—but worry is not necessary and we have precious little of it."

He bowed slightly, very slightly, as if he were not accustomed to appease people with courtesies, and turned on his heel.

As he went a man came to him with sundry papers. Glebof took them casually and seemed to read them with no interest till the name of Stolemkin caught his attention.

The look that came in his face when he saw that name was fearful and wonderful, ecstatic and hateful. Columbus at the sight of land might have

shown something akin to it, but there was mingled with the joy (debasing it, of course) the exultation of the man who cries, "Have I found thee, O mine enemy!"

"Bring the man to me," he said, "on whom this paper was found."

## CHAPTER VI

"From stratagem to stratagem we run."

—DRYDEN.

GLEBOF went towards the hut which was his sister's and called—

"Sofia."

She came at once to the door and he put the paper before her.

"Count Stolemkin——" She looked into his face with the certainty that she should see there the reflection of the satisfaction that did not soothe but exulted her spirit.

He nodded and pressed his lips together.

"But he isn't here?" she said a little excitedly.

"No, Sofia, but we are in the midst of one of his schemes."

She saw there was room for rejoicing.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Not yet. But I have sent for the man."

"Doesn't she know?" She nodded in the direction of the hut occupied by Melania Nicholovna.

"The little Countess?"

"Countess, eh?"

"Yes, the Countess Puroff. *She* is no schemer, but Stolemkin wants her."

"For his son, perhaps," she said, with the light-



ning-like guess of a woman about a woman, which is so often right.

Glebof smiled as if the suggestion pleased him. "For his son perhaps." It was a choice idea! And there was exquisite satisfaction in the thought that the Countess was here if that was Stolemkin's plan.

"I think we can do something now, Sofia," he said.

"He would not desire her for nothing. Is she any relation?"

"I will ask."

So it happened that the Countess came again to be questioned by the robber captain at the same time as Gordon was brought before him.

Gordon was conscious now and bandaged, and when he saw the Countess safe—at least from wounds—he uttered a little cry of thankfulness.

She saw his expression and went towards him.

"Oh—you are wounded?"

"Scratched—a mere nothing. But you, Melania Nicholovna?"

"I am unhurt. These people only want money," she added. "They will do *you* no harm?" she asked anxiously and hurriedly.

"Some of them don't look like angels of mercy, do they? Imagine that man in——"

His sentence was cut short by another one.

"Separate them," said Glebof. "Bring the woman here."

The order was obeyed with celerity and thoroughness. Glebof was clearly a man who had the knack of authority. He was ruthless when it came to

expediency, and amongst robbers that type commands.

"The woman first," he said.

Sofia had watched the Countess and Gordon with a most observant keenness. The looks, the attitudes, the solicitation in each for the other told its tale. Sofia, not knowing all, wondered what it meant.

"Are you a connexion of Count Stolemkin's?" Glebof asked the Countess.

She looked surprised.

"No. I do not know him at all."

The surprise came to the other party now—at hers as well as at her reply.

"Why are you going to——" Then he stopped. The scheme was perhaps more delicate than he imagined and care might be of service. There might be something in the suggestion of his sister.

"Have you ever met Count Stolemkin?" he asked.

"No—not that I remember."

"Where are you going?"

She hesitated and then caught a look from the autocrat's eyes.

"We were going to St. Petersburg," she said coldly and with just a hint of irony. She did not care for Glebof's commanding ways.

"What for?"

"I do not know," she said quickly—almost too quickly, for she wondered the next moment if she did wisely to tell that. People who speak too quickly generally sow seeds of repentance.

Glebof was not satisfied. He wanted to know all, for that is the basis of successful thwarting. He thought of Gordon.

"Bring the man here," he said, and he motioned his men to take the Countess away.

Sofia noticed that the Countess turned to look and smile encouragingly at Gordon before she was taken back to her hut. The reward of observation is advantage.

"Who are you?" asked Glebof of Gordon.

Gordon looked a curious sight in his bandaged arm and head, but his eyes were bright and he was rarely cowed by his enemies. He hesitated and then came to the conclusion that his name was of no importance.

"Gordon, by the grace of God! of the Gordons of Abergeldie, a place that you are probably never likely to see, for if you carry on this pretty career much longer you are very sure to drop in Hell first——"

Glebof waved his hand and looked very stern.

"Do not waste words," he said with more in the suggestiveness of the tone than the mildness of the words seemed to warrant. "Gordon—a foreigner?"

"Thank God!"

"Or the devil! Never mind. A foreigner—what is your business with Count Stolemkin?"

Gordon looked at his questioner keenly.

"Precious small."

"Do you thank God or the devil this time?" Glebof asked.

"Since you have made it very small, I suppose I

ought to say the devil—but I don't thank him, sir. That is all."

"You enjoy life?" said Glebof a little unbending.

"When I have it: don't you?"

"I enjoy its opportunities," replied Glebof with a little more meaning than Gordon liked.

"The devil!" he said, but his eyes looked bright the next instant. "Opportunities for what, Captain?"

"Amongst other things, emptying people's pockets."

"What for? To fill your own belly?"

"That—also amongst other things. And now I want you to tell me exactly what your relations are with Count Stolemkin and why you are taking that lady—the Countess Puroff—to St. Petersburg."

"And if I refuse?"

"I shall torture you."

Gordon whistled and bowed.

"I like frankness," he said.

"I too," said Glebof.

They were silent for a moment. Glebof could afford to be quiet: Gordon found it advantageous. They were both men who could make their minds speak their thoughts clearly and act with resolution.

"Why shouldn't I tell you?" said Gordon.

Glebof did not speak.

"Why should I tell you?"

Glebof did not speak, but he looked at Gordon with depressing power.

Gordon laughed.

"And again, why should I not? I take the Countess Puroff to St. Petersburg to Count Stolemkin——"

“ Well ? ”

Gordon hesitated, for his jollity was killed by reality. He thought of the Countess, not as the Countess Puroff with great possessions, but as a woman, innocent and sweet.

“ Because I am a hound,” he said with a kind of disgust in his face, “ a hireling, a creature bought and sold, ready for the highest offer and the lowest work. Yes, I will tell you, Beelzebub, son of Mephistopheles, for it matters very little now who knows why——”

He stopped. His repentance seemed to be carrying him too far. After all, repentance as well as being a virtue is a reward. It gains happiness or forgiveness for us. Gordon said quietly—

“ By God ! it does matter.”

“ What matters ? ”

“ If she knows why I am taking her to St. Petersburg to Count Stolemkin.”

“ I ask, not she,” said Glebof quietly, but with eyes so keen that they reflected a fire somewhere.

“ You won’t tell her ? ” said Gordon quickly.

“ I will use my discretion.”

“ Yes, yes. And why should you not tell her ? Let her know what I am. What am I to her ? She will probably prefer you to me. You do rob and attack like men. I—I get paid to take her to that Stolemkin so that he can marry her to his son. She to—— Sh ! ” His voice sank to a whisper.

“ Don’t tell her yet. She must know, but not yet.”

Glebof waved his hand to silence him.

“ That will do,” he said. “ I am glad you have told me. Take him back,” he said to some of his



men : and as they were going away he added, " See he has what he wants and is comfortable."

Glebof turned and walked to where his sister was waiting. There was triumph in his stride and joy and exultation, but held down as if he had been accustomed to keep a strong hand on his passions.

" Sofia," he said.

She came to him quickly, catching the ring in his voice.

" You were right," he said. " Stolemkin wants her to marry his son."

She clenched her hands.

" Thank God ! Thank God ! Thank God ! " she said.

" Now to trick him," he said.

" We have her, at any rate."

" That isn't enough."

" But it is something. She will be rich, eh ? "

" Yes, she will be rich, or Stolemkin the Viper would not want her for his son."

" But he shall not have her," she said.

" No. And that is not enough. At any rate, little sister, we are in the middle of the spider's web now, and we ought to be able to do something."

They were both silent and felt no need for words. He and she were both thinking of the same thing—how to repay a debt of vengeance to Count Stolemkin. They had no need of speech to fan the flame of their feeling : what they wanted now was an idea (a very common want in all times and in all places). They wished to utilize their advantage to the uttermost. How could they hurt Count Stolemkin ? They could prevent the marriage, they could exact



ransom. . . . But they wished to hurt, to humiliate. The humiliation of others is where man shows his superiority over the brute creation. From which it is clear that we develop in all directions bad as well as good.

Sofia sat down on the stump of an old tree that had been cut down to provide wood for the hut-building. There were many things to impress on her that the weak must minister to the strong, a doctrine she had learned with tears and nursed with bitterness. Now she was among the strong. The finer people are what they themselves think they are: the coarser what others think them.

Sofia and Juri Glebof, the children of the Count Stolemkin's dead steward, were now themselves the wielders of power, and the arbiters of life and death. Juri, by his concentration, his fury, his courage in fight as well as by his character and ability, was soon made chief of the band to which he and his sister allied themselves. Sofia had many temptations, for men were passionate and daring, and some of the robbers were of noble blood. But Juri protected her, and once he became chief his sister was respected for his sake: subsequently they honoured her for her own. She shirked nothing and shared all. She was also, in her way, well educated. When books were got she read them: soldiers told her histories of wars, priests discussed theology and philosophy with her, nobles told her of the court and travellers of other lands.

In the meanwhile men of the order of Count Stolemkin suffered, and he fell into no trouble. But if one sails on one always sails home at last.

Amidst their vicissitudes the Glebofs had remembered their father, flogged to death by the order of Count Stolemkin.

And now they had got hold of something which might allow them to expend some of their feelings in the way they desired. The worst of vengeance is, it does as much damage to the pursuer's soul as it does to the body of the victim. But that is by the way.

Juri Glebof turned aside to think. As a rule he made excellent use of his opportunities, and that kind of man makes his mark. The greatest men, of course, make their opportunities. The majority of his men were now eating and drinking and making merry over the captures of the day. They sang songs and told tales and drank wine, beer and brandy.

Glebof, dressed in long top-boots, a long coat buckled at the waist and a round fur hat, went back towards his sister.

"Well, Sofia, have you thought of anything?"

"What does the man say?" she asked.

"Gordon is his name—a foreigner. He was merely conducting her to St. Petersburg."

"Ah!—He would like to marry her himself, I fancy."

"That is an idea."

"It would not please Stolemkin."

He looked as if the idea pleased him.

"That will do, Sofia. And we could get our share of the Countess's wealth, too, for the privilege."

"I think she would like it, too. I wonder if she cares for Stolemkin's son?"

"She has never met Stolemkin—does not know him."

"Does she know why she goes to St. Petersburg?"

"No. Stolemkin has sent this man Gordon to fetch her, and seemingly will wed her to his son when he gets possession of her."

"Juri——"

She stood up."

"If she has not seen the Stolemkin, nor he her, and they do not know each other——"

"The devil, Sofia—any cat from the mouth of Hell would do," he said swiftly, catching her suggestion madly. "Any of these she-devils round here packed to St. Petersburg as the Countess What's-her-name would be received by the villain as well as the real thing, and—phew! be married to his son—to Count Stolemkin's son."

They looked at each other.

"If it can be done," he whispered.

"If it can be done," she repeated. "He must be deceived—Juri—a big marriage in the capital with all St. Petersburg there, and the Count Stolemkin's son marries——" She laughed.

"And afterwards, when the news gets out and all St. Petersburg sees what a fool the Count Stolemkin has been——"

"It is worth it," she said.

"I would let all this woman's treasure go to do it," he said.

"What is treasure to *that*?"

"Aye! aye!"

They were silent again, conning the suggestion,

getting ahead of it and seeing what they wanted : the humiliation and rage of Count Stolemkin.

“ I will have this foreigner here again and discover all he knows.”

“ Yes. What the son of the Count is like and—and——”

“ Can you think of any one who could be trusted to go to St. Petersburg as this little Countess ? ”

“ I think so. I have some one in my mind. But send for the foreigner first.”

So Gordon was sent for again, and came wondering at the frequent catechizing. He was struck with the force of the young leader and the compact youth of the girl. Their heads seemed much older than their bodies : but that is the stamp of the observant and those who remember.

Gordon could not tell them overmuch. He spoke freely of Stolemkin and confessed he did not know the son. He thought the Count mighty eager to get hold of the Countess. By this time he was disgusted with his mission. Not on account of this seeming failure—that would have nerved him to success—but for other reasons, which the reader has already noted.

Sofia was right. Gordon felt very much battered in soul and body : but after his conversation with the Glebofs he felt better—in soul, at any rate. He almost rejoiced he had been thwarted in his attempt to take the Countess to St. Petersburg to be married to Stolemkin's son.

Melania Nicholovna——

But he wasn't quite sure that he ought to rejoice : perhaps she would be better the wife of Stolemkin

than—than—phew ! in the hands of these bandits ! Food for reflection there.

Thank God ! the chief—what a young piece of steel he was !—had no nonsense about him. Might be an old Puritan Ironside reincarnated ! But the others ! What a lot ! The scum of a battlefield with all the vices of war.

There would not be much peace of mind for Louis William Gordon till the Countess Puroff was out of contact with these robbers.

“ You had better see the Countess now, Juri,” said Sofia, when Gordon had been reconducted to his quarters.

So Melania Nicholovna was brought forth once more to understand how power is a matter of geography. A few versts away—comparatively speaking—she was all-powerful. Here in this forest, with the pine lifting their straight limbs towards the sky, with the birch hinting at all kinds of pleasant things with their silver coats, with the mossy carpet underfoot, and roystering sounds from thick throats, she was of no account. A mere pawn in the hands of players. The autocrat has lost power through the decrease of distance. When Russia has as many railways to the square mile as England the Tsar will have no more power than the most constitutional monarch in Europe.

Sofia looked keenly at the Countess as Juri questioned her, and was struck by her choiceness. She was worth marrying—yet Stolemkin had not seen her.

“ Have you ever seen Count Stolemkin’s son ? ” Glebof asked her.

“ No ; why do you ask ? ”



"And you do not know why you are going to St. Petersburg—to Count Stolemkin?"

"To Count Stolemkin?" she repeated.

"Can you not guess?" said Sofia very quietly.

The Countess turned to look at her. They were all watching each other closely, trying to see behind the veil.

"He has a son," said Glebof.

Either she would not or did not understand at first: but then she paled.

"A son—oh, no!" The cry was involuntary. "I do not know him. And Louis Alexandrovitch—but he would not do *that*." She looked at Glebof with a pain-struck face.

He said nothing.

Sofia, brown-eyed, calm, strong and penetrating, spoke quietly.

"Are you rich?"

The Countess paused. The remark was less a question than a hint, a key to the puzzle.

"I have estates," said Melania Nicholovna almost sorrowfully.

"And serfs?"

"Perhaps thirty thousand."

"The villain, Count Stolemkin—he is a black villain," said Sofia, "would marry his son to your estates and your thirty thousand serfs."

Melania Nicholovna looked like a rudderless ship in the storm. Then her pride came to her rescue and she looked stiffer, as one accustomed to be consulted.

"He dare not," she said, and her face was white.

"The German, Biren, would make you if Stolemkin a ked him," said Glebof.



She was readily accessible to facts. Pride and fear ran through her like currents in a deep sea.

"Help me!" she said.

Glebof pressed his lips tightly: his business was rather destruction than succour.

But Sofia touched her kindly.

"We hate that Stolemkin," she said, and the Countess knew at once that she might hope for sympathy in that quarter. "You shall never marry his son."

"Thank God! and thank you!"

When Glebof asked his sister later in the day whom they should send to St. Petersburg as the Countess Puroff, she replied: "I will tell you to-morrow."

## CHAPTER VII

"I have set my life upon a cast,  
And I will stand the hazard of the die."  
—*Richard III.*

THEY both cherished the idea with delight. A mother with her first-born could scarcely have been more glad. An idea to tease, torment, humiliate Count Stolemkin was one to command almost whole-hearted attention from Glebof and his sister.

Marrying Count Stolemkin's son, to whom? Glebof thought of the women in his company. They were a garish lot. Most were impossible, of course, for age is inexorable. Some, with all the qualifications of vice and ugliness, lacked ability to play the rôle. It was difficult the more one thinks of it, for the choice was restricted to women of casual morals living with robbers! What a choice for the ambitious Stolemkin! And what gratification for his friends! The Count's son married to an impossibility, who was deemed to be the wealthy Countess Puroff! St. Petersburg and Moscow would not hold the laughter, and what would Stolemkin's wrath be like?

In the meanwhile, of course, Count Stolemkin

was waiting with great hope and confidence in the capital for the arrival of Gordon.

And Glebof was feeling more and more content. He had tried to find a fitting mate for Stolemkin's son, but had shaken his head over almost all the women of his company. A, B, C—ugh! They were very desirable from *his* point of view, but they would not impose on Stolemkin. At least, Glebof thought the risk too great, and he was accustomed to risk a great deal. This, of course, was different, for failure would be bitter and success a thing ecstatic.

He had risen early, and the sun's early rays had filtered through the tracery of the forest with delicate persistency. The sentries of the camp were at their post keeping watch against man and beast. The others slept; most of them the sleep of the drunken, for the age of brass was succeeded by that of beer and brandy. When we reach the abstemious age, beware!

Sofia was also about early. Although only about twenty years of age, she looked older. If iron enters the soul young the face reflects the hardness. Yet Sofia Glebof was attractive as a woman. She was well formed, healthy-looking, and a little too capable for a man about the average. He would never know what to make of her, and probably in despair curse her and say, "These women——" with a cluck of the tongue and a waggle of the head. A clever man would understand and a fool—the kind that possesses wisdom—would follow her.

She had straight well-defined eyebrows and her nose held up her forehead and had a good wide

bridge. She certainly possessed a nose, but short, squat noses were (and are) common in Russia. So it was no offence. Her eyes, brown and blue and green—quite varied-hued, were changeful and luminous. They were set well under her eyebrows and had the sparkle of precious diamonds, the depths of rivers, and the reflection of mirrors. Her mouth was not tiny, but it was as clear-cut as a cameo, and she had a chin full of warning to the discerning. The dull, of course, would not notice it.

Juri was her brother in appearance as well as in reality, and he added to a fire and daring a prudence and self-control that were remarkable in one so tutored and so young.

"Well," he said to his sister, "I have been thinking of the one to go to the villain, but I cannot find her."

"I too," she said.

"It is difficult. These women are not much good—except to breed."

"And bad for that," she said. "Some of them are worth no more than clothes and less than a horse."

"And yet we must choose one of them."

"You could not think which?"

"I thought of the Palinoff."

She shook her head.

"She would get drunk and tell all," Sofia said.

"I pictured her at that."

"Yes, there is only one woman here who can go."

"And that is?"

"Myself."

Glebof looked at his sister. This was certainly out of his reckoning, for marriage was a thing precious as rubies for a woman—so he thought—and there could be little gratification in prospect for Sofia Glebof married to the son of Count Stolemkin after a piece of daring imposture.

“You!” Everybody will easily understand exactly how it was said.

Sofia, being human and a woman, enjoyed the note of surprise, but she did not dwell on it, for she was really a person above the average.

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Nobody else can do.”

He knew that was true, for the drabs about the camp were incapable of the delicate rôle a spurious Countess would have to play in St. Petersburg.

“No. But, Sofia—you dare——?”

It was half a compliment and half a doubt. She was sensible, feminine and egotistic, and took it wholly as a compliment.

“Yes.”

“There are risks.”

“I will run them.”

“And will you marry the man?”

She nodded.

He took her by the arms.

“Sofia, that is for life, perhaps——”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Or for a ceremony,” she said.

He stared and wondered at her decision.

“You have thought it all out—what it will mean?”

“We both know what it will mean, Juri.”

"Yes, to him. But to you? Married—what will you do?"

"Leave him."

He thought a moment.

"Yes—yes. But then, you cannot marry again."

She shook her head.

"Swine!" she said with a wave of her hand towards the sleeping wives and others—married. I do not want a husband, Juri."

"You may—there are better men than these." He was, one observes, piqued a little in his sex. Husbands should not be treated with disdain and the capture of one with contempt. The prejudices of sex will be overcome when the millennium arrives, not before.

She shuddered. A man may regard marriage as folly, but not with disgust: with the woman it is the other way about.

Fortunately he was quick to observe: though he was disappointed.

"Sofia," he said, "this is what I did not expect. You must not run the risk unless you think you can escape safely."

"No one else can do it," she said. "I can. And I will, Juri."

He was too surprised to say more for the moment than: "Let me think it over."

He walked away from her along a line of oak trees which sheltered his camp, and when he came back saw his sister where he had left her. That perhaps was a hint of her character: when she made up her mind she was not easily moved.

Brother and sister had gone together through



days and nights of trials and troubles, and each knew the other's worth. Robbery like soldiery was a fair enough calling in Russia in those days: in fact, there was little to choose between them except on the ground of thoroughness and extent, in which the soldiers were easily first.

But a man will think he is looking after a woman, while all the time she feels she is mothering him.

"I don't like to let you go, Sofia."

"What is there to fear?"

"If you are detected——"

"Why should I be? Count Stolemkin does not know the Countess, nor me. I will go with her dresses, her maid, and she will tell me all I need know."

"Her maid—if she should betray you?"

"I will shoot her." She spoke calmly. "But she will be sensible, not for my sake, but for her mistress's. The Countess will stay here till I come back."

"Yes, yes, Sofia. I will keep her till you return. She shall be a hostage for you. And this foreigner, Gordon, he must take you. It seems that we shall have to trust to many."

"Yes, to two—him and the woman. But the Countess will make them discreet. Particularly the man. He, I think, will be very glad that the Countess will not marry Stolemkin's son."

Juri watched her. He was still cherishing the idea that Sofia herself was going to St. Petersburg, to meet Count Stolemkin, and perhaps a great many other Counts and influential people, to marry his

son and be the observed of dozens of critical eyes. It was a risk.

"I wish I were going instead of you, Sofia," he said.

"If you were going I should have a wish like that," she retorted. "And your turn will come."

"Perhaps—perhaps. After this, I shall not ask for much."

"This will be something," she said.

"All St. Petersburg will watch you—perhaps even the Empress—and Biren."

"So much the better," she said quietly.

"We shall make fools of a great many," he said.

"A great many deserve it, and most of them will howl at the Stolemkin. They will rejoice over his humiliation. They will even be ready to forgive—perhaps reward me for it."

"You will escape at once after the ceremony?"

"We may go for a honeymoon to one of—my estates," she said roguishly, "and on the way you could meet us, Juri——"

He was as near to smiling as a desperate, idea-dominated man of twenty-five could be.

"I will meet you—and your husband," he said—as if the only part reserved to him to be played would be performed without a hitch and without reproach.

"Will you tell the Countess, Juri?" she asked.

"Yes."

She turned away without further ado. She and her brother were linked by more than a common parentage—they had common perils endured, common triumphs enjoyed, and an idea that burned in them both. They knew each other's wishes well.

In this camp the huts were made of wood cut almost entirely by the axe. Sofia had her own abode, and no one ever molested her. She had a position respected and unquestioned, and she rarely interfered with the followers of her brother or joined in their carousings—hence her title of Saint Sofia. But she was not a saint, except on the theory that various kinds of saints must people the earth.

The Countess had been hard hit by the news of Stolemkin's plan. It blasted the joyous romance that had stimulated her to glorious fancy at certain moments and wrecked her trust in joy. To be married like that! Ordered to come to St. Petersburg to take a husband, or rather (much rather) be taken for a wife by a man before she could even hesitate! It was a cruel humiliation! And yet it was common. She knew a number of wives who had been married by order. Even Prince Galitsuin had been forced to marry a Kalmink girl of common birth. The Empress Anna had ordered it and there was no hesitation: there was the ice palace, too, built for this odd couple, in which they spent the first night of their married life. Where there is power unlimited there is folly immeasurable.

But the Countess, humiliated and struck as she was by the fate that had been destined her, was inclined, after a night's reflection, to find comfort in her situation. Her capture by these robbers might turn out to her advantage. There was hope that she would escape this projected marriage, and if so—well, when romance came peeping in with the rising sun, Cupid got on the table. In fact, Countess Puroff, being young and of a pleasant disposition,

was fast becoming an excellent optimist, and believing that all was turning out for the best in this best of all possible worlds. It is a capital outlook, good for the liver, the digestion, the expression and life generally, only one wants a certain amount of philosophy, tolerance and blindness to keep up to the mark.

Glebof, who did not let the grass grow under his feet, had an interview with the Countess again early in the morning. He wanted to see that he quite understood the case and could build on a sure foundation—the elementary proceeding of all sound architects.

He wasted little time in preliminaries. He wanted her to tell him exactly what had happened from the time Gordon had called on her to her capture.

She spoke frankly and found herself boggling over the part played by Louis Alexandrovitch. She began to realize the truth at last, though she would not believe it till Glebof told her.

“Louis Alexandrovitch—did he know?” she asked, and he saw her anxiety, but had no desire to alleviate it. He bore things and was not accustomed to delicacies and hints.

“Yes. He knew he was taking you to your husband.”

Now she went white. She suffered now. She clasped her hands tightly and her eyes, just covered with a gentle mist, hid the full measure of the storm that raged within her. The other blow was a thing impersonal, a kind of result of forces; but this was different. Louis Alexandrovitch was one who had appeared to her to be a courtly, gallant gentleman

with just the qualities and graces to please a woman. She had met him, taken salt with him, drank wine and eaten bread with him. And he seemingly had tricked her.

He had gaily taken her from her home with the intention of handing her to Count Stolemkin as a wife for his son. That was infamous! It degraded.

In her anger she saved herself from tears. She tried to put from her the image of Gordon, the figure of the gallant who called on her, and the brave man who fought for her and was wounded for her. . . . This picture softened her. She was not quite so sure of herself now. He had fought nobly. . . .

Glebof watched her as if she were telling him all the truth of the business.

She felt the need for action, words—something, and said warmly, “I will not go,” with a fine figure of pride, showing disdain of consequence. It was as if she said, “You can take me to the altar, but you can’t make me say ‘I will.’”

Her attitude amused Glebof, who was accustomed to defiance and generally broke it, or rendered it nevermore possible in the defiant person. And though he was by nature a direct man he had his subtle moments.

“I could take you to St. Petersburg though, if I wished,” he said, “and put you in the arms of Count Stolemkin—if I wished.”

She tried to look indifferent to threats—and probably managed it successfully for a moment—but the swift consideration of the power of this man who had taken her prisoner was sufficient to induce her to follow tact rather than fling defiance.



"Possibly," she said very quietly, indicating that if the flag had to be lowered, it would be done without undue humiliation.

"Certainly," he corrected. "But it may please me, Countess, to please you."

"I do not want to marry this Count Stolemkin's son," she said quietly, "for I do not know him."

"I do not wish that you should. But you must help me."

"To escape this marriage?" She spoke gladly.

"Yes."

"That I will do willingly."

"It is well said. Some one must go. It would not do for Count Stolemkin to be disappointed, and so—my sister will take your place."

Surprise flatters us, makes us think we have achieved something, else why does it give us such pleasure? Those who cannot keep secrets are folks very susceptible to flattery as a rule, over-fond of adulation. Glebof was too earnest for trivialities even at twenty-five, so the Countess's fine surprise was no oblation to him.

It was something startling, nevertheless. "You need not go to be married: I will send some one in your place!" Told almost casually too! It was almost uncanny.

"Your sister will go in my place?" she said.

It needed a little digestion, as one sees.

"Yes, my sister. Nobody else will do. Somebody must go to delude Count Stolemkin, you understand. He must think the person who goes to St. Petersburg to marry his son is the Countess Puroff—you understand that also?"



“ Oh ! but——” They came like the movements of a mind not accustomed to deeds of this kind.

Glebof continued—

“ So my sister will go. We can, unfortunately, trust nobody else. You will therefore give her all the information you can concerning yourself and your family.”

The Countess was too astonished to make protest or comment. It was the situation in which a person says : “ I was so surprised I could not utter a word ” ; or, “ It was the strangest thing that ever happened.”

Glebof took it so calmly, he might have been arranging different wives for unsuspecting husbands for a long time.

“ There is my sister,” he said. “ You had better go and talk to her.”

## CHAPTER VIII

"Facilis descensus Averno est."

—VIRGIL.

THE Countess having well digested the idea became at one moment mutinous (on grounds of principle) and then perfectly resigned (on grounds of expediency).

Sofia converted her quietly. She explained rather than argued. The Countess wished to know the reason of this plotting, and Sofia, not minding who knew the motive, told. So the conversation took a peculiar turn. At one instant the Countess would explain that her father's friends were So-and-so and So-and-so, that he had been here and there and done such and such things, and at the next she would clasp her hands in amazement that these things should be, pray to the saints to protect her, and ask Sofia what it felt like going to be married—like that. Very mixed!

Sofia kept repeating phrases, expressions, names, et cetera, so that she would be well armed with knowledge when she reached St. Petersburg. She did not explain how she felt at the prospect of marriage—the contemplation of the episode did not move her.

But the Countess was more a woman than when

she set out. Destined for marriage with a man she had never seen, taken by a man whom she was beginning to regard with a deep interest, captured by brigands, and now assisting at a gigantic imposture ! She knew the risk she ran, but the Glebofs—brother and sister—calmly said that worse things would befall her unless she consented. And the force of a future storm is less than the attraction of a present harbour. Her own future was vague and very uncertain, but at present her life was not sorrowful.

She tried to keep Gordon from her thoughts, but could not succeed, and one day said to Sofia—

“ Who will take you, Sofia Petrovna ? ”

“ The foreigner—Gordon.”

“ He knows ? ”

“ Yes. My brother has told him.”

“ And he will ? ”

A pause, then : “ Certainly.”

“ But he—he knows who you are. Will he say you are the Countess Puroff ? ”

“ Of course.”

“ Oh ! . . . ” The Countess was disturbed.

“ He must, Melania Nicholovna,” said Sofia. “ If he does not, somebody else will and he will die.”

“ Oh ! ”

“ You would not like him to die ? ”

“ I—I would not like anybody to die,” she said tenderly.

“ I thought not. So it is much better that he live and go to St. Petersburg than die and go to Purgatory.”

The Countess quite agreed in that.

The train being laid, Sofia being possessed of almost all the Puroff knowledge available, all that now remained was to decide on the escort for the journey. Gordon was recovered and indispensable—being available. Nobody is really indispensable: that is how we crow over Death. At first Glebof thought he might let Nickoff and Pendeff go as Gordon pleaded for them, but there was too much risk. They were not asked if they would connive in the imposture, for Glebof's refusal to let them go made that a superfluity.

Gordon asked to be allowed to see the Countess before leaving and Glebof consented.

The Countess, however, at first refused. She was much disturbed in spirit over Gordon, and when she declared she would not see him, knew that she longed to meet him. But pride somehow ordered her tongue. It is tantalizing when the emotions get hold of us at the time we desire to act according to the dictates of our reason. Sensation is stronger than judgment: that is why women are not the best judges. It was Sofia who said that Gordon desired the interview, and Melania Nicholovna's "No" was such a weak thing that Sofia, understanding, said—

"I will send him. Will you see him here?"

Melania Nicholovna paused (while there was a slight tussle between pride and feeling) and then said meekly, "Here."

So Gordon came and the Countess imagined it her bounden duty to assume an attitude of indifference.

But Gordon did not come with the air of a conqueror, in the style of one who woos by winning, in the majesty of a master. His wound was healed, but his face was pale and his heart was tremulous. This girl with the violet eyes and the soul of something so different from the accustomed army bent Gordon to a kind of awe.

"I am going to St. Petersburg, Melania Nicholovna."

"Yes."

"I hope I may have your forgiveness for—for this misadventure."

She looked at him in surprise.

"You mean for allowing me to be captured by these robbers?"

"Yes."

"You have my forgiveness for that, though there was no need of it. This you could not help. You were not paid to deliver me to these robbers and you did your best, I grant that, to preserve me from them."

He bowed. She had after all a right to remind him he had been paid to serve her ill.

"You know why I was taking you to St. Petersburg?"

"I do."

"Do you forgive me for that too?"

She did not answer.

"I do not forgive myself," he said quietly.

Still she did not answer, though she had a desire to look at him, to see what expression he bore, to read the story in his eyes. But she did not dare.

"May I explain?" he asked.



"Is it necessary?" She longed to hear him speak, else she would have cut short the interview.

"Yes," he replied. "I agreed to take you to St. Petersburg to Count Stolemkin because I was glad of something to do. If I had not come another would. And there was honour in being first to you for there were others on the road. You might have been—so different from what you are. And maids are married without much protest here. So it was nothing to me that I came for Count Stolemkin, and now, it is something that I go to him as I do."

She wanted to speak and could not.

"I am glad Count Stolemkin will be baulked, Melania Nicholovna."

"You are not a very faithful servant." She boggled at the name and refused it. She was glad to be able to speak, for she wished to forgive and yet to remind without undue piquancy.

"Like master, like servant. I can be faithful, in some cases, Melania Nicholovna, unto death."

"I did not wish to reproach you on the ground of unfaithfulness, Louis Alexandrovitch," she said.

"I am glad. You know what I am going to do?"

"Yes."

"I am taking the Countess Puroff to Count Stolemkin—you understand?"

She hesitated. She was made a party to the imposture.

"Yes," she muttered.

"It is the best way. I believe he deserves it. And you will forgive me?"

She fixed her eyes on him and was too young to

dwelt in resentment, when he spoke and looked as he did.

"I forgive you," she said.

He took her hand with a courtly attitude and kissed it. She was not unwilling.

"I can, Melania Nicholovna," he repeated, "be faithful unto death," and there was no mistaking the fervour in the voice.

Her bosom heaved. He was the first man to have touched her heart. She looked at him with more than gratitude.

"I believe you," she murmured.

"I will come back," he said

"But you run a risk, a great risk in St. Petersburg——"

She was quickly laying aside pride and pomp.

"I have run much greater, dear lady, and shall come back to you—to take you safely from these." He made a motion with his arm to signify her present captors.

"I—I shall be glad to see you—safe out of St. Petersburg."

"I am most grateful, Melania Nicholovna. I shall go now with hope and return with joy." I shall mind neither Stolemkin nor his pranks and tricks, for I know you will be glad to see me again."

"Safe out of St. Petersburg," she said quickly, with her heart beating somewhat quickly too. "For I fear, Louis Alexandrovitch, I fear."

"Not for me. I shall come now I know you will be glad to see me again——"

He waited for her to finish the sentence once more

if she would. He hung as upon a precipice, waved a defiant flag and——

She held her peace.

So he took her hand again and the colour now went to her face and her limbs trembled with a wild emotion. He bent on one knee and kissed her hand, holding it well.

“Now I have your forgiveness I am happy, and yet not so happy as at the news you will be glad to see me again.”

“Yes, come again,” she murmured.

He took leave of her as one who goes fully armed and with all confidence to reach his great wish. And she watched him go with eyes aflame, with cheeks burning and a fire of such gladness in her heart as she had never known before.

Sofia was now the Countess Puroff. She knew the histories of all her dead relatives and the peculiarities of the living ones. She was not likely to meet anybody in St. Petersburg who had seen her since she was a small child, so that curiosity would easily be satisfied and suspicion unawakened.

The maid was coached, drilled, and warned. The safety of her mistress depended on somebody else successfully taking her place. Marie was dubious of many things at first, but the Countess—the real one—spoke to her so distinctly that finally she understood with the thoroughness of the dull.

Gordon had his kibitka to himself this time and Sofia had hers. She was naturally self-contained and did not paint her emotions on her face to attract the casual. But there was a look of serener seriousness about her as she left her brother.

"If anything happens, Sofia," he said, "I will kill Stolemkin."

"Things will happen as we wish, Juri."

That is the way the strong talk, and Sofia Glebof was no weakling.

Glebof sent two of his most trusted men to watch over Sofia and be at hand in case of need to bring messages to him of importance.

So Gordon, not unhappy, was going to risk much in a great imposture. It had not taken him long to realize the inevitableness of the situation. When Glebof had first suggested his taking some one else as the Countess Puroff to Stolemkin, Gordon had laughed at him. The thing was preposterous from so many points of view. That is the worst of first impressions—a gentle incline is a mountain, a cloud a thing of substance, a trivial act one of importance, and so on. Glebof with power behind him spoke quietly and to the point. Gordon's connivance was necessary, otherwise to spite Stolemkin the real Countess would be killed and hers and Gordon's ears sent to St. Petersburg as testamentary evidence. There was no advantage in that to the Countess or to Gordon. And Louis, seeing the way of salvation for the slip of a woman with violet eyes, and a great game for himself to play in a world where imposture was forgiven to daring, and the reward went to the bold, actually came to welcome the idea. He even put aside the manifold advantages and pleased himself with the idea that Stolemkin deserved it. It was Providence bruising the head of the devil. And there were certainly risks, which was spice in the wine, humour in the drama.

They left tears behind—the Countess's. She was young, alone, and somewhat in love. Tears were natural and becoming. And it was a risky situation for a woman, young and beautiful, to be alone amongst a pack of robbers. In Russia in the eighteenth century risky situations for men and women were as common as the days.

Through the thick forest went Gordon and Sofia. The first dark, almost black underneath, showed a refreshing green light where the sun's rays pierced the army of arboreal spears and struck companionship with the ends of the boughs. The road was littered with the slaughter of the wind and tempest and the season's scythe. The broken lower branches of the firs, too, gave ambition's lesson from Nature : what to-day we delight in, to-morrow we spurn.

And then out of the forest, past land that heaved slowly like a leviathan, over rivers creeping snake-wise towards their Nirvana, through towns, on they went towards their goal.

They changed horses at the post-houses, replenished their stock with the things they required, and they entered on the final stage of the journey to Stolemkin and the great imposture.

Gordon found himself mightily disturbed. He called Sofia Melania Nicholovna and the act seemed to grip his vitals. He could not pronounce that name without seeing the real owner of it and he dwelt on it like a musician on a beautiful chord.

Sofia might have been brass, polished, attractive and warm-looking, but nerveless and cold. Yet she was not that by zones. She had a will uncommon to most women, for the danger she incurred was great.



Having her tongue cut out would probably be one of the least of her sufferings if she were caught at her audacious game.

Gordon, too, carried plenty in his hands, but principally he went for his heart's sake, and that will take a man to *altaltissimo*.

They both looked with bright eyes as they entered Peter's new capital, for their thoughts were nudging each other in anticipation. There was, in fact, a slight scuffle at the very entrance to the town. A man with sharp, tiny eyes standing at the corner of a street as Gordon passed threw a cudgel, which missed Louis William's head by a bare inch.

Gordon was out in a trice with sword and pistol. Two other men seemed to make for the carriage where Sofia was, but at the sight of the pistol and Gordon's eyes and stride they hung back, then withdrew with ample discretion.

It was like Frolof's work: a fair plan lacking thorough management.

Count Stolemkin's joy was exuberant and almost ostentatious when the postboys dashed to his door. He came out with jovial tongue, irrepressible gesture and triumph in every attitude. He shook hands with Gordon as if his hands were the maws of an alligator and was greatly surprised at Gordon's coolness. It was a characteristic of the foreigner, he imagined—cold-blooded, brave and very useful. But his blue eyes showed their colour (not much at the best of times, but interesting in their steely hue) when he saw Sofia.

She, too, was cool and his blood, bubbling at magnificence point, made him wonder why they were

both so cool. He thought it remarkable: then realized it was foolish to expect them to feel what he felt: they knew nothing of his thoughts. So he welcomed Countess Puroff with warmth, was delighted to welcome her for her father's sake, but now that he had seen her, for her own.

She was calm and reserved. She thanked him and discreetly let him do almost all the talking.

Phew! He whistled to himself when they were indoors. "She is a prize. Air of an empress. What grandchildren! She will be a mother in a million."

He drained a large tankard of beer. He chuckled loudly, chuckled heartily. . . "Frolof and Bulavin," he muttered. "Ho! ho! ho! What a face! And breasts and hips. . ." He was half inclined to marry the girl himself and find another mate for his son.

He chuckled immensely.

For the matter of that so did Sofia, only she made no fuss about it.

And Gordon knew how to hide his feelings.

## CHAPTER IX

“As a rule men freely believe what they wish.”

—CAESAR.

THE introduction of Stolemkin's son to his future wife was a moment of impressions. Vasili Antonovitch had wondered very much “if he would like her or not.” His timid eyes looked rabbit-like at an unusual figure. But Sofia, self-possessed, modest, inclined to be timorous, and not the least forward, gave him every encouragement. She bowed submissively and said nothing. He was tongue-tied too, for she surprised him and he was uncommonly nervous. The big Count laughed.

“He is all right,” said the heavy father. “He is his mother's son and will be a kind husband.”

“He will control his wife less than any I know,” said Sofia to herself. To Stolemkin she looked a picture of the perfect woman (in a man's eyes), and the ideal wife (in her husband's). For a second time he thought his son such a lucky creature that he almost envied him.

Sofia played her rôle so admirably that Stolemkin boasted through St. Petersburg of the coming wedding and his elect daughter-in-law's virtues.

Biren had ratified the promise, and Frolof and Bulavin, cursing somewhat, had pretended to join

in the general congratulations. Bulavin's man had returned home, but Frolof's had not. Frolof, knowing he had lost, did not mind what had become of his emissary—so long as it was something unpleasant, for he felt hugely vindictive.

St. Petersburg tongues wagged, of course, for Stolemkin's capture was rather dazzling. The match-making mothers and advantage-seeking fathers wondered why they had allowed such a prize to be secured by the Stolemkin bear. They sniffed for a weakness in the trail.

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes. A perfect moujik—hands like a woodman's."

"Incredible! Hands like a woodman's. . . And her manners?"

"She scarcely moves: barely opens her mouth."

"And all that wealth!"

"Preposterous! And Stolemkin's son is a poor wight, is he not?"

"Pouf! St. Peter!—only quarter of a man. A worm with a groan, but watches the clouds they tell me and reads poetry."

"They will be a fine match."

"But the girl has something in her." The lady wagged her head.

"Ah! Intelligent?"

"I cannot say. She is deep—like a pool, so it is difficult to say what: but there is something in her. She has a jaw."

"A jaw! And hands like a woodman's."

"And yet, one won't take liberties with her."

"Men or women?"

"Neither. The men won't want and the women won't dare."

"A tigress, eh? She will suit Stolemkin—but what wealth! And how he boasts!"

"He always did. A perfect beast. I wish his moujik would scratch his eyes out. Have you heard——"

This was about other matters and does not concern our people. The conversation was only typical. There was malice in it, of course, but women are not chivalrous in defeat, and in the scramble for laurel and leisure which keeps idle society going, gossip is part of the game. It is indeed by conversations such as these that one gathers contemporary views (with a reduction of fifty per cent. at least to account for the bias).

The fact is noteworthy: Stolemkin scored and, knowing it, blazed it abroad. The story of the race leaked out and that put a frame of Romance round Sofia. Gordon, too, was mentioned freely, but he kept in the dark places as much as possible, and refused to speak of the journey. Silence is good, but the right word at the right time is better. Even Gordon's silence made one observant man wonder, and that was to be deprecated at present.

Stolemkin, knowing there was many a slip between the cup and the lip, hastened the preparations for the marriage. He did not care to let Sofia out of his keeping and sent his son to live with an uncle.

Sofia puzzled him. He was not of the most penetrating breed, but he could not reconcile many of her actions with her bearing and her looks. It was patent—as the lady had remarked—no one could



take liberties with her : yet she seemed lamb-like on occasions, easily led, of no resistance. The truth was Sofia felt her way amid customs and ceremonies that were as novel to her as furniture and frivolities.

St. Petersburg society had the morals of the farm-yard, and Stolemkin, repeating something lewd concerning one distinguished and noble lady, saw Sofia look modest and angry. He became envious of his son again and giggled to himself.

Sofia felt her way with wondrous caution. She made use of Marie to the limit of possibilities. She made her fetch and carry gossip, discover intentions, explain methods and give instruction. The maid was nervous but elated—swelling her head with pride and fearing greatly for her skin.

Sofia was making sure of Stolemkin's faith in her. She held him firmly, and no one was keener of dragging this peasant girl into the Stolemkin family circle than he. He pushed his son to Sofia, slapped him, almost kicked him, on to her, feeling all the time the girl was far too good for him.

Vasili Antonovitch was regular in his attendance, and the Count, his father, almost as regular in his jeers.

"Come on, you milk-faced, petticoat soul!" he cried out as he saw his son bowing before the ikon. "She is too good for you, but by the saints! she will help you to beget decent sons. Seen her hips, boy? If you start any mooning with her she will put you across her knee—and serve you right. Waken you up! Are you satisfied with her?"

"Yes, father."

"Is she satisfied with you?" He laughed jeer-

ingly. "Here," he handed him a stiff glass of brandy. "Drink that. Get life into you, man, when you go near a woman like Melania Nicholovna."

Vasili Antonovitch took the brandy and with an eye on the ikon (as a prayer to Heaven) and a thought for Melania Nicholovna drank the spirit almost with gusto. He might have been a knight-errant taking a holy potion. His father looked up in surprise: then he strode to him and slapped him (hard) on the back

"Bravo! By the saints! you are improving. Is she making you take to a good drink, or is it the brandy driving you to her? Let me look at you." He turned him about as he might have turned a joint on a jack and slapped him as he might have hit a horse on the buttock.

Vasili Antonovitch shook.

The big man laughed.

"She will play the devil with you, I'll warrant. Son o' mine, trussed by a woman . . . It will be, I can see that. By Heaven! she is too good for you. I may have to take her myself."

Vasili Antonovitch winced and in self-defence and self-assertion stretched himself. The motive was patent and the man of blood and beer laughed.

To see Vasili push out his chest like a soldier was comical. After all the peacock has done more brilliant things for his womankind, and puffing a chest is a small matter, though it may signify much.

"Go to her," shouted Stolemkin *père*. "Let her lick you before she eats you." He imitated the puffing of the chest and laughed. "By God! but you are stirred: the blood's moving. Go to her."

The father in him was almost pleased. His offspring had more in him than had been reckoned on. Stolemkin went out to boast—far from nicely—that his son was doing his wooing like a lion.

Sofia, meek and modest at first with Vasili Antonovitch, grew bolder as she discovered his character. A woman invariably, almost instinctively, measures the length, breadth and height of a man. She wants to know how far she can go with him and what he really weighs in the balance. A man, with the heritage of rule in him, goes floundering like an elephant in a flower-garden. The slave watches his master's eye and understands it: the master bludgeons and blunders.

Vasili Antonovitch, being somewhat feminine, felt his way and quickly discovered that Melania Nicholovna (i.e., Sofia—it is hoped the reader won't find the nomenclature troublesome) desired to be friends. He didn't see the depth of her—he is not to be adversely criticized on that score—but what he did understand pleased and comforted him. (Sofia saw through him in a quarter of an hour—at least, well enough for her purpose.)

He was a poor specimen of a man at their first meeting, stammering, purring, glancing, sighing—nothing long and all without a solitary virtue to catch a woman who wants a mate and not something dollish. To Sofia this was important as straws. She weighed her man and knew how to deal with him. The father in a way was easy to handle for a woman of Sofia's figure and will. It was the ladies who knew a thing or two, who pried, put leading questions, doubled back on past admissions, seemed

to have suspicions and something up their sleeves—these Sofia wished would keep away from her.

Vasili Antonovitch came into the room where Sofia was with the air of Esther going to call on King Ahasuerus. He stood in the outer court, as it were, and waited.

“Vasili Antonovitch,” she said.

He came forward like a schoolboy.

“Melania Nicholovna——” Then he stuck.

“Well,” and she cast a glance round the room by a warning of instinct, “are you glad to come and see me, or do you come because you ought?”

“I am glad, Melania Nicholovna.”

“Your father sent you, I am sure.”

“I would not mind who sent me, Melania Nicholovna. I am glad.”

“And only saw me, as it were, yesterday.”

“Yesterday or yesterday years ago, Melania Nicholovna. I am glad.”

Vasili was distinctly sincere. Sofia had captured not only the father, but the son—rather good slaying when one thinks of the difference in their natures.

She looked now at Vasili, measuring him, of course, for he was the victim of his father’s brutality. With him Sofia anticipated no trouble.

“Am I like what you expected?” she asked, ringing on the eternal feminine anvil: but ringing on it like a master. She had no care for his answer to flatter her.

“N-no, and yet—— I have forgotten now,” he said charmingly and simply, “what I expected. I know I was afraid——”

“Afraid?”

"That I might not like you."

He stammered it all most beautifully, with no brazen dash, no covering : he showed his soul naked and unashamed.

He did not stir her pulse an atom.

"And do you?" she asked very quietly with simulation sufficient for two.

He touched her hand and sighed.

"Yes—yes. I am so glad you came, Melania Nicholovna."

He noticed that her hands were firmer than his and she saw the way of his observation.

"I have lived in the country all my life," she said.

"I like the country," he said.

"When we are married, we will go there."

He looked at her worshippingly. He dared not have made such a speech, and yet he loved her for making it. "When we are married." . . . If anything she was almost too deadly indifferent to all save the purpose in view. She caught herself up at times and a languorous look escaped her, but not often, for she regarded such tricks as mere "ointments"—that was her own word.

"I like the country," he said. "Have you been to St. Petersburg often?"

"No."

He sat by her side waiting, like a subject upon his sovereign.

She gently led him on to speak of his daily round, his father's habits, the people who visited there, and gathered neatly and effectively the information which pleased her.

He, delighted to sit near her and talk to her,



spoke freely and without restraint. He confessed at the end, when through the excitement of his joy he gained confidence, that he did not care much for his father, and then looked at her curiously as if afraid of her judgment and even denunciation.

She looked at him oddly. He was, to her, a curious creature, and she had met many quaint specimens of humanity.

"He is something of a brute, eh?" she said almost with luxury, for it was pleasant in St. Petersburg, in that house, to Stolemkin's son, to say something bitter concerning the butcherer of her father.

Vasili looked round timorously: then nodded.

"They say it is wicked not to love one's father."

"One's parents, Vasili Antonovitch, are men and women. If they are kind and good, we respect and love them: if they are cruel and bad, we hate them—and God curse them! . . . Mine"—she paused with a dreary vision before her—"were good."

"Count Puroff was good and kind—yes, I am sure of it."

She had, for a moment, forgotten herself. Count Puroff was her father, but she had thought of another, one flogged to death by Count Stolemkin's orders. She looked at Vasili quickly with her penetrating—almost animal penetrating—eyes, and was satisfied. Why should he suspect? The last person contagious to suspicion is a man in love. The interesting thing concerning suspicion is that in some cases it is significant of knowledge and intelligence and in others of ignorance and stupidity. Love bowls them all out alike.

"Yes," she said, "and your father is not good, eh?"

"Sh!" He put his finger on his lips.

"Or kind?"

"Are you not afraid?"

"No."

He stared at her.

"I used to be," he muttered, almost as if meditating on the fact.

"And are you not now?"

"Not since I have seen you—not so much, Melania Nicholovna."

She turned away her head.

"What do they say of me in St. Petersburg?" she asked abruptly.

"I fancy they are jealous," he said.

"Jealous?"

"Yes—of me." And he laughed, a little proudly—somewhat cock-sparrowish: he could scarcely manage the sublime peacock.

"You do not tell me what they say," she continued, her desire for direct information being a keen affair with her and not a matter of rippling rapture.

"They praise you, Melania Nicholovna, they say you are beautiful. My father admires you—very much."

"But the others, what do they say? Tell me everything—what they praise and what they criticize. I would rather know what they criticize."

"They say I am lucky and you are—they do not criticize——"

"Yes they do."

He looked at her timidly.

"They must," she said a little more softly. "I want to know particularly what they criticize."

Most of us say that but we don't mean it. People do not relish criticism as a rule, in spite of loud declarations, but they do relish praise. There is no sauce like it, and none are so credulous as the flattered. Sofia wanted to hear criticism because she wished to know if she erred in her strange surroundings.

But Vasili could not remember the criticisms, so she listened to the praises.

She easily gathered that her marriage with Count Stolemkin's son was apparently a great topic of St. Petersburg society. Everybody seemed to be taking an interest in it, and Count Stolemkin himself was boasting right and left, in every quarter, of the marriage of his son with an heiress who had "estates in Livonia, Revel, Ukraine and Moscow; jewels to dazzle the Shah of Persia, the King of France, and endow the Great Frederick; wood enough to put palisading round Europe; fish to fill up the Caspian, and 30,000 serfs."

There was no doubt of Stolemkin's humour: he boasted astonishingly.

"The moment people see me now," said Vasili, "they at once talk of my wedding."

"Encourage them," she said, "If they talk of the wealth of Countess Puroff"—she permitted herself a slight gesture—"increase it."

He, glad to do anything she asked, said he would multiply it as much as she liked.

"Vasili Antonovitch," she said quietly.

"Yes, Melania Nicholovna."

"Do you really care for me?"

"I adore you, Melania. I would die for you."

She put up a warning finger to stop his repetition.

"Will you do anything I ask you?"

"Anything—ask me now."

"It is a promise?"

"It is an oath, Melania Nicholovna—I swear it."

"I will remember," she said.

## CHAPTER X

"Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,  
Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate."

—SAMUEL JOHNSON.

**M**EN and women go their great and little ways pursuing their varied plans, recking for the most part nothing of their pursuers. We strive and strive and strive and Circumstance (the real name of the Sphinx) arranges things as he cares, and our little (or big) schemes, taking their chance, either come to naught or, in the glorious moment of success, inspire a prayer to Providence for the little . . . circumstance.

Circumstance has as many faces as there are figures on the die. He can laugh and cry at the same moment—at two different people, of course. But his greatest delight is to get hold of Surprise and plot with him. They make havoc of mortal plans then, and their laughter is a thing Titanic. Only the discerning can hear them. Both the wise and the foolish talk of Luck, not thinking perhaps they are referring to the offspring of Circumstance and Surprise, a boisterous child of no responsibility, caring for nothing but effect.

Sofia watched the preparations for her marriage with careful and observant eyes. She heard the



reverberations of Stolemkin's boasts with pleasure, and always encouraged his cannonading in that direction. She was not nervous. Familiarity was gradually eating up all the timid shoots of anxiety, and Sofia began to feel as safe in St. Petersburg and Stolemkin's house as in the woods south of the Valdai Hills. And she was greatly gratified by the stir she had made in the pool of St. Petersburg society. The bigger the attraction she became, the more satisfaction would be drawn from the plight of Count Stolemkin. And by this time presents were arriving daily in honour of the lucky couple. Count Stolemkin swore at his son and longed to lay hands on his daughter-in-law elect, but she kept him at a safe arm's length. He gambled recklessly at faro and quinze, and promised to pay in good time : he thought of the estates and the jewels and the wood and the fish of Countess Puroff.

The Court had returned from its short season at Peterof, and began to take an interest in the wedding. Biren considered the whole affair one of his scheming and was, therefore, in self-interest bound to take great notice of the function. Ostermann, too, was greatly interested.

Gordon, watched from afar. He was somewhat disquieted at times when he thought of the real Melania Nicholovna in the hands of Glebof ; and he also realized to the full that the consequences would be neither mean nor desirable when Stolemkin was hoist with the imposture and his boasting was swept away in the tempest of ridicule.

Russia was full of the terrible at that age, even if the savage Ivan was dead. The " Secret Court

of Police " with the brutal Ushakof at the head was equal to any injustice and neglected no cruelty.

Glebof sent messengers to St. Petersburg so as to be kept informed of what went on, and Sofia managed to communicate with him without difficulty.

The proximity of the wedding made more than two or three persons nervous in St. Petersburg. The fugitive escaping over the frontier and the slave within sight of the boundaries of Freedom had kindred feelings to the conspirators of Stolemkin's humiliation.

When the day of the ceremony dawned, Gordon felt an intense relief. For him this day ended the purgatory of his stay in St. Petersburg ; for Sofia it was the uprising of the curtain on the side-splitting farce, " The Fooling of Count Stolemkin."

She did not concern herself with what might follow : whether " The Punishment of Sofia Glebof " or anything else. She was for tragic-farce and wore an air of triumph.

She was dressed in white satin with silver braid and silver buttons. The Court dressmakers had lent their aid and Count Stolemkin said nothing must be stinted. So far as he was concerned the affair was princely, for he never forgot the estates and the jewels, the timber, the fish, and the thirty thousand serfs. All St. Petersburg of consideration was there.

Vasili had wondered at his luck and then thanked God for it. The Archimandrite performed the ceremony before crowded aisles, and Sofia was a modest and most attractive bride. Count Stolemkin

made up for his son's humility by an excess of pride, but he was not offensive on this day. He could not help being jovial, hospitable, joyous.

The reception afterwards was a crowded affair.

Vasili Antonovitch and his bride were to spend their honeymoon near Peterof, and then, at Sofia's request, were to visit her estate near Moscow.

But the Unexpected played a card and complicated matters.

Belof, the faithful steward, had somehow been suspicious of Gordon. Probably he was suspicious of everybody who came near his mistress: there are people of that uncomfortable order. The departure of Melania Nicholovna with Gordon had been a disturbing matter to him, particularly as Gordon had refused to say why the Countess was suddenly called to St. Petersburg. Mystery is always fascinating, though it has sometimes the fascination of the rattle-snake.

Belof, in a suspicious, unsatisfied mood, received Bulavin's emissary. "The Countess gone. . . . How long? . . . Which way? . . . With whom? . . ." et cetera. This man was slow but desperate. But, of course, he mystified Belof more and more, deepened his suspicion and widened his fears.

Two people in a great hurry to take his mistress to St. Petersburg, and the second of them so desperate that he would chase the first. . . . It was an idea calculated to disturb a person less prone to suspicion and more given to rapid conclusions than Paul Belof.

He was mightily disturbed. What could it mean? And Melania Nicholovna was now in the care—*care*,

custody rather of that iron-like man with the curly brown hair and curious name.

Belof wondered what he should do. He was a big, heavy man, as the reader will recall, with red hair, moustache and beard and ponderous men generally are not the quickest in thought and action. When they are, they are men of mark.

On the top of Belof's perplexity came the third inquirer for the Countess. So behold Belof in the arms of Amazement. He was roused to fear and a grim anxiety. He had the faithfulness of the creature who elevates his master to the rank of god and makes of service a divine function.

Frolof's son had come himself, and as he had travelled easily with great regard for comfort, he had arrived last. He swore and wondered why Fate should have dealt unkindly with him. The incompetent always blame Fate or Circumstance or Some body Else.

But he lit a fire in Belof's soul.

A third for his mistress! All from St. Petersburg and all desirous to take her there! He began to shake with fear. He felt there was something afoot which boded evil to his beloved mistress. He crept to Frolof like a suppliant and begged for news, for reasons.

Frolof laughed.

"Your mistress, man, will be married when she reaches St. Petersburg."

"Married . . ." It might have been worse, but did she desire it? If not then there was trouble in store for her.

"Did she know?"

"I know not. The man that got her to St. Petersburg married her. It was either Stolemkin or Bulavin since I was too unlucky to grab the heiress."

"She did not know—She did not know." He moaned it like an incantation. He thought of her on the way to St. Petersburg to be married to some one when she reached there. And she did not know . . .

So he begged Frolof to take him to St. Petersburg. He would find plenty of provisions and his own carriage. So Frolof, being indolent and very partial to the consideration of outside forces, agreed to take Belof with him, harbouring at the same time the hope that the presence of the Countess Puroff's steward would act as a kind of talisman and bring him luck. He began to say deludingly to himself: "If I win after all. If I should snatch the bounteous prize from Stolemkin . . ."

He dreamed easily and in moments of hope imagined Providence was directing his steps.

On the way to St. Petersburg he loitered, as a man trusting to Providence and not to himself felt quite entitled to do, and Belof groaned. He took heed of nothing. He desired movement: progress was his sole satisfaction. They had not been gone twelve hours on the journey before Belof began to look for traces of his mistress. He had hopes that they might overtake her: that she had met with some slight mishap and would be very surprised to see them.

At the post-houses Belof made inquiries but got no satisfaction. And they moved so slowly, the



country seemed so big, the journey so long. They did not travel by the road Gordon had taken, but went circuitously round one forest—fear in their eyeballs—and further to the west. No wonder Frolof was last (and he was always blaming his luck!). He insisted on staying a couple of days at a post-house. He disliked constant travel: it wore him out, gave him megrims. And the post-houses were uninteresting, unentertaining. They were just large square wooden buildings, with a spacious courtyard. Three sides of the square were appropriated for stables and sheds for carriages and large barns for hay and corn. The front of the house was given up to the postmaster and his servants and apartments for travellers.

But Frolof was glad of the little rest, gladder, perhaps, of the opportunity to flirt with the waiting wench and sorry to go. Belof fumed continually in a despairing way. He prayed constantly and fixed an ikon in his carriage. But nothing would move Frolof till he had had his rest and rioting at almost every post-house.

Belof sickened at the pace. His mistress, he knew, had been in the capital long, long ago and might be married—for all he knew—before she was warned.

Taken away like that. . . . He recalled how suspicious he had been of the man who took her away, who said nothing clear that a man or woman could understand. Oh! there would be trouble for Gordon if anything untoward had happened to Melania Nicholovna.

So the jolting, the singing of the postboys, the

stoppages and the panorama went on with the progress of the frivolous Frolof and the faithful Belof.

That Belof was hugely tired in body and mind when he eventually arrived in St. Petersburg the reader will readily understand. He came at a crucial time. Sofia was being married to Count Stolemkin's son, and from the crowd that gathered to see the great, Belop managed to glean the essential facts. Having picked up stirring information he looked wildly for his mistress. He rushed here and there; he craned, pushed, was rudely repulsed; and all the time his heart was beating to a tune wild, boisterous, tempestuous. "Melania Nicholovna . . ." He muttered the words as one might repeat a loving saying, the prayer of a saint, the name of a beloved.

His eyes were red with the weary journey and the anxious watching, and this tremendous moment made them look wilder still.

His great red hair and beard made him a conspicuous figure, but he looked in vain for his mistress. He did not care for bride or bridesmaid, for ladies-in-waiting, for guests, for those whether of high or low degree who held the attention of the crowd: he looked simply for his young mistress.

When the procession had returned Belof was amazed. He had not seen his mistress and looked like one cheated. He was standing near a sour man, who never cheered, but grunted and swore. He was one of the Bulavin forces and knew what he had missed.

Belof, bewildered, turned to him.

"What is this?" He asked for the twentieth time, hoping to get a different answer. Your dull man is very hard to convince against his will.

The other man grunted.

"A wedding."

"Whose?"

"Countess Puroff with Stolemkin's son."

"Countess Puroff? Oh! . . . Has she passed?"

"Yes, passed just now. You saw her well enough. In white she was."

"No, no. That was not she."

"Then the devil take her—you too," said the man and turned away.

The Countess Puroff in white . . . That was not Melania Nicholovna. He had seen the lady in white well enough, but she was not the Countess Puroff.

Belof was more and more perplexed. He felt like a straw tossed in the way, a ship in the tempest, a cloud swirled in space.

He was lost in this city and his mistress was lost. What had happened to her? He dropped on his knees and prayed. The sight was common enough. Primitive people are not afraid of calling on their God either in public or private: it is in semi-intellectual circles that Providence is treated as a poor relative.

Rising, Belof went in the direction the carriages had gone. He reached the house where great gaiety prevailed and his storm-tossed mind was singularly out of place.

They were drinking wine, they were gossiping,

they were railling each other, flattering each other, envying each other: indulging gentleness and pleasantness with gall and bitterness, and over and above the medley, and through it, there rang the notes of humanity's comedy, man's tragedy. The cymbals were like it for noise. As to colour, it was superb. The rainbow might have vied in delicacy, but here was movement and life breaking the light and shade of orange and gold, red and purple, emerald and green, white and the dazzle of jewels.

Sofia had changed her white dress to one of rose, prepared for a journey. Vasili, a being of timorous nerves and vague ecstasies, watched her every movement. Count Stolemkin went from guest to guest with the air of a conqueror.

It was a memorable scene.

Count Bulavin was there also, smiling to hide his envy, wondering at Stolemkin's luck.

Princess Nolavof, of great privileges, was talking to Count Bulavin about a couple of yards away from the bride, who was receiving some final injunctions and jocularities from her father-in-law.

"Carries herself well," said the Princess.

"Not much like her father," said Bulavin. "She has a chin that will scotch Anton Gregorovitch."

"Poor Vasili Antonovitch!" (She referred to the bridegroom.) "She will do pretty well what she wants."

"As most of you do, Princess."

"With the permission of our lords and masters."

"Or without it. Would you call Vasili Antonovitch a lord and master?"

"The saints forbid. The little Melania Nicholovna will lock him in whenever she wants to go out."

"And will that be often, do you think?"

"It is difficult to say. The men seem to be decaying so."

Just then Belof pushed his way amongst the Count Stolemkin's guests. The servants had let him in because he said he was the steward of Countess Puroff and they happened to be almost drunk. He was wildly looking about him for his mistress and attracted the attention of one or two in his vicinity. He carried his hat in his hand and desperation on his face. His wild red hair hung untidily about his ears. He looked for a lady in white and muttered, "Melania Nicholovna."

Count Stolemkin saw him and went to him.

"What is it? How the devil did you come here?"

"My mistress, Excellency—my mistress, Melania Nicholovna."

Stolemkin grabbed his arm and pointed to Sofia.

"There! She is no longer Countess Puroff  
\_\_\_\_\_"

"Where? Where?" asked Belof, looking round.

"There!"

"Where, Excellency, where?"

Stolemkin pushed him to Sofia.

"Now, do you see her?" he said with a grin.

One might as well have grinned at Hagar and asked her if she saw water.

Belof looked vacantly round and then at Stolemkin, who imagined a fool had crept in his paradise.

Sofia somehow felt danger. Who was this wild-



looking man? What did he want? Why did Count Stolemkin say, "Now do you see her?"

She realized the truth in a flash. Happy they who see things quickly! They have twice the pleasures of other folks and avoid stumbling-blocks.

She was silent for a moment, for the great defensive instinct is to lie still and say nothing; but that is the way of the weak and feeble. To pretend that silence was golden here is to salt the mine of wisdom. The dull understand only after much reasoning, the wise with a mere hint of it.

"What is it?" she asked of Count Stolemkin, stepping forward.

"He is a fool," he whispered. "He wants you and doesn't recognize you." And as he said the words a feeling of something suspicious came to him.

But she dashed at Belof with—

"Why do you come here now?"

He began: "Excellency, I——"

"That will do. I cannot bother with you now. Go! Go." She clutched his arm. "You know Mr. Gordon." He looked enlightened: this at least was a tangible trace. "Go to him," she continued, "I will send you a message." She nodded to her husband and asked him to write down Gordon's address on a piece of paper. She whispered ominously to Belof: "If you talk to anybody here, I will have you flogged."

He trembled and muttered—

"Melania Nicholovna," and looked like a lamb at a butcher.

"She is well," whispered Sofia. "But she will suffer if you do not keep quiet."

Vasili gave her the paper which she handed to Belof with the words: "Go there at once and say I sent you."

Still bewildered, Belof turned. The paper was something: it let him feel he was on the track of his mistress and the other lady said she was well.

Sofia tried to keep cool. She felt spied on from all sides. Her father-in-law liked her spirit and said smilingly—

"What is it, my daughter?"

"A stupid," she said. "He had no right to be here. But he has the devotion of an animal."

"Didn't recognize you." Stolemkin laughed.

"That is his way," said Sofia. "He is stupid, but—well, they are most of them that."

Bulavin and Princess Nolavof had watched the incident with interest.

"What was that?" said the Princess, "farce, comedy, or tragedy?"

"I wonder," said Bulavin, "if it could possibly contain the seeds of all three."

The Princess laughed.

## CHAPTER XI

"In love, the heavens themselves do guide the state;  
Money buys land, and wives are sold by fate."

—*Merry Wives of Windsor.*

**A**MONGST the fascinating speculations of the human race the emotions of other people occupy a prominent position. Think of it: the man escaping from justice laid by the heels just as liberty was in sight—what were his feelings? The man who won the unexpected prize, the man who aimed at the stars and hit them! the man who thought he was sinking and found salvation . . .

It is a gorgeous amusement, but a little trying.

Sofia's sensations were of an interesting nature as she drove away with her husband: his also.

They were husband and wife. He was more than satisfied. He sat beside her with feelings too sacred and too vague for general expression and a sense of gratitude dominated him. He was glad to the point of awe. It was almost too sweet to be real.

Vasili Antonovitch, with a hard, brutal father, had missed the delicacies of life and had lived in caves of his own contriving so that he might worship, like the prophets in the time of Elisha, at the altars of his own choosing. It was not so much he lacked

manliness as that he was dominated by a bully and held to ridicule for ways that were unpleasing to a man with a huge appetite for the coarse.

And he had feared marriage, as he had feared most things. Novelty brings calamity was a popular saying in Russia in those days, and Vasili grew to shrink from all the evils he knew not of. A wife too . . . He was timid with women even while he felt they were akin to him. But the Court women of Russia were in a desperate hurry for success and could not dally with a man who stammered over a salutation and could not pay a compliment. So the idea of marriage made him tremble. The timid, shy and nervous will understand him. He longed and dared not. He would give all to do it and forfeit his life to avoid it. He would and would not and endured agonies.

Yet Sofia (with a mission) made him comfortable. He walked easily with her. She was not as other women. She did not laugh at him or make fun or do the silly monkey and peacocky tricks they indulged in. He was at peace by her side and felt all else well lost. But he recognized her force. He did not win her—that he knew. If his father had not sent for her she had not been his, and yet he felt proud. She did not slight him, mark you, and she had paid him the delicate, telling compliments that charm a man and make words all bubble and froth in comparison—the compliments of confidence, trust, aid, refuge.

To Vasili this was the gift of Heaven. He felt she was a willing wife, and that was enough.

He sat by her, darting glances of homage inces-

santly. His hands were restless and he dared not. His mouth longed and he dared not. He knew other men did these things, and that they were not considered the prerogatives but the proper duty and service of men—yet he dared not. He felt he was foolish and yet thanked Providence. He had enough. This was his wife—his wife by his side.

As husband and wife Vasili and Sofia ought to have had common feelings of ecstasy and joy: they had gone through the ceremony that poets sing and novelists so frequently end with. But nobody is deluded. It is now that the imaginative person gets his chance and does not fear contradiction. When you see the beautiful woman and the handsome man, or beauty and the beast, or Apollo and the viper, or the two very middling, who can dip in their hearts? Only Time. He knows, and, like a wise person, does not always tell.

Sofia was silent and pensive. She was married, and somehow the marriage was not quite the triumph she had dreamed of. She was satisfied all the same. Count Stolemkin, the man who had her father flogged to death, was cheated and fooled: but the price seemed now a little high. And yet, do not let us mislead ourselves; she was satisfied. Her husband was attentive and unobjectionable, which she found comforting.

But she thought of the man with the red hair.

In all their calculations they had worked on the assumption that nobody in St. Petersburg at that time knew the Countess Puroff. Who was this man with the dog-like eyes and the flaming hair? Sofia answered the question by congratulating herself on



having disposed of him before Count Stolemkin grew suspicious. But now that the ceremony was over she saw the advisability of leaving St. Petersburg at the earliest possible opportunity. This visit to Peterof was a nuisance, but could not be avoided because Ostermann, the Chancellor, had put the house at their disposal.

Vasili whispered—

“Sofia.”

“Yes.” She answered coldly but quickly.

“Are you glad it is over?” he asked timidly rather from desire of speech than of information.

“Yes.”

He put his hand on hers gently, but she at once put it away with a firm, but not rough, movement. He was disturbed at the action and did not dare to speak for some minutes. She took no notice of him. Her thoughts were with her purpose.

As they neared the house where they were to stay he grew nervous again, but she seemed so cool that he borrowed virtue from her and gained a little confidence. He helped her down from the carriage, but she neither looked at him nor smiled.

Marie, her maid, was there to receive her, and came forward curiously, with all the motley ideas of a young woman welcoming a bride tossing themselves in her silly mind like moths in a flame.

Sofia entered with a face calm and serious, and Marie, impinged on romance, was disconcerted. She was chilled and began to utter some hackneyed felicitations in a forced key. Sofia stopped her with—

“Thank you. I understand. Is everything ready?”

"Yes, Melania Nicholovna."

And as soon as she had got rid of her cloak she dismissed the girl, who was amazed, thinking a robber's sister ought to have been far more demonstrative than this—after marrying the son of a noble.

Vasili hovered about his wife timorously. He put his hand on her shoulder and would have kissed her, but she started at the touch and blazed at the action.

"Do not do that," she said.

He found it inexplicable and felt chilled.

"Sofia," he muttered, grief hovering about his heart, "you are my wife——"

"I know," and she seemed to be thinking of something else.

Vasili knew husbands had rights.

"I do not understand," he muttered.

"It is not necessary," she replied.

He was bewildered.

"But we are married, Sofia. Surely now——"

"I do not know what you want to do, Vasili, but there is no necessity for you to touch me. I will not allow it."

He was silent for a moment, the situation in its unexpectedness robbing him of words. Besides, he was a man accustomed to buffets and a stronger soul.

"I—love you, Sofia," he said gently.

She looked at him curiously: a tinge of pity in her regard. She might so have looked at a lamb with a broken leg.

"I am worried," she said, and he took it apologetically, which soothed him.

"I am sorry. Can I do anything?"

"Yes. I would like to see Gordon."

“ When ? ”

“ At once.”

“ At once,” he repeated, a little astonished, and he was now quite confident that the tale of his marriage would surely be different from the general run. But the odd had been his portion always, and it is the leaping from one groove into another at the proper time that shows our work.

“ Yes,” she said. “ Send for him.”

He was glad even to do something for her, notwithstanding his frozen heart. So he went out and sent a messenger to Gordon. When he returned to the room Sofia was sitting meditating. He said, as if he were at ease—

“ I have sent a man.”

“ I hope he won’t be long. . . Thank you.”

Then they were silent.

She was perfectly indifferent. She had the ease and confidence of strength plus its inevitable egotism. And yet not the egotism of the selfish, but the identification of herself with her schemes to the exclusion of other persons and things. There was no necessity for her to please others.

Vasili watched her.

“ I hope you will like it here, Sofia,” he said, still feeling somewhat ill at ease.

“ Um—whose house is it ? ”

“ Count Ostermann’s.”

“ Is he not some one important ? ”

“ Yes, yes, I believe he is High Admiral. But he is a most powerful man.”

“ Where is this ? ”

“ Peterof.”

"Yes. And that?" She pointed to the water in the distance.

"The Neva. It is where the Court comes for part of the summer, and this is Count Ostermann's house."

"Is he rich?"

"Very. But he has had office so long, and people who have offices always become rich."

"Or die," she said coldly.

He laughed gladly. He was exceedingly willing to win her to gaiety.

"Or die," he repeated flatteringly.

She did not even smile: she had made the remark in grim earnestness with a sense of its perfect truth.

"Gordon is a long time coming," she said.

"I told the man to hurry."

She walked up and down the room, looking occasionally through the windows on to the silver river in the distance, with more intimate sensation of the wooden dwelling on the other side of the Valdai Hills than she had had since she had been in St. Petersburg."

Gordon was announced.

Sofia turned to Vasili.

"Will you leave us a few minutes?"

He was not even hurt at the suggestion: he did not mind that his wife did not take him into her confidence or tell him of the things that worried her. That was her pleasure: let it be his. He left them willingly.

"I congratulate you—Countess," said Gordon.

"It is one thing done, at any rate. But now we must get away. I want to leave this cave without delay."

"I expected the messenger from your brother to-day, but he has not arrived. The moment he does, I will let you know."

"Be careful. Have you seen a red-haired, red-bearded man who has something to do with the Countess Puroff—probably her servant?"

Gordon considered, then recalled him.

"Her steward, major-domo, tame lion, in the Ukraine."

"But he has called on you?"

"Here—in St. Petersburg?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Then the tame lion is loose and we must be prudent."

She gave him an account of Belof's visit to Count Stolemkin's.

"It may be serious," said Gordon. "These dog-like fools are always barking at the wrong time. You seem to have got out of the corner well—Excellency."

"I don't worry about corners I have got out of, but of those I am in. I want to get out of this place now. I have given the serpent a good long crawl, and it is time now he began to feel the lash."

"I will make preparations to go as soon as you wish."

"I wanted the villain to have his fill, but now this red-haired creature is in St. Petersburg it would be better to go away at once."

"You say you sent him to me?"

"Yes."

"Then I will shut his mouth."



She looked at him curiously.

"For ever?" she asked quietly, as if she understood that method.

"No. I did not think of that. It is not necessary."

"I did not wish it," she said. "I expect he is a faithful steward who has had the good fortune not to be under the heel of a Stolemkin. I merely hope he will not lead us into danger."

"I will go back at once and wait for the wanderer. Once I have him, I will calm him. He can do what he likes once we are clear of the capital."

Sofia was silent. She only spoke when she felt inclined. Gordon looked at her.

"Don't you feel afraid?" he asked.

"Do you?" she retorted.

"I don't run the same risk."

"They will break us both on the wheel if they catch us when they know."

"It is a pleasant outlook," he said.

"Yes," she said with fervour. "It is a pleasant outlook, Louis Gordon. It is pleasant for me because I have played a trick on that murderous villain Stolemkin that will make him the laughing-stock of St. Petersburg. He will suffer from this more than he has suffered from anything in his whole life."

"There is nothing like ridicule. By the saints! He will be as furious as a burnt bear."

"And after——" she nodded her head.

"More?"

"He flogged my father to death," she said.

"I don't think," said Gordon, "that your father was his only victim."

After a pause she said—

“It is for that I would like to stay. I want to jeer at the man, laugh at him. I understand those people of old who shouted at—who was it—Samson?”

“Yes. But there is danger in delay, and it is better to live and laugh at a distance—than jeer too near and die. Bears hug.”

“Sometimes, not always,” she said. “He is worse than a bear.”

“You risk too much. I will arrange for your journey,” said Gordon, seeing her mood. “I have no desire to be broken on the wheel for the sake of hearing even your jeer, Sofia Petrovna.”

“You can prepare,” she said. “I am always ready. Keep the poor steward quiet. We will laugh in the woods, Louis Gordon, and you will not be broken on the wheel.”

As Gordon was about to go he said, somewhat tentatively: “Your husband——?”

“Well?”

“Well, will he come too?”

“I think so,” she said.

He looked at her as if he would read more, but she was not one who let herself be too easily read.

“I will prepare for him also,” he said, and took his leave.

Vasili saw Gordon go and then came back to his wife.

“An important interview,” he said, with a note of gaiety as if he would show that he had perfect confidence in her and could be jovial. He was, it

must be remembered, in an exalted humour and attempted the genial with a timid and heavy hand.

"Yes," she said.

"That Gordon—he is a brave man, I believe. My father thinks highly of him."

Sofia did not answer.

"When he came for you, Sofia—did you—how did you feel?"

"I do not remember."

"Not remember? I was anxious from the moment I saw Gordon depart till the day he returned."

"For him?"

He moved a hand gently towards her, but she saw the manœuvre and neatly made it of none effect.

"No. Why should I be anxious for him? No, Sofia——" He stopped, hoping she would help him with more questions, but she was silent.

"Yes, I was anxious," he continued.

"So you said."

"But not about him," he added markedly, playing for her assistance.

"So you said," she repeated.

"About you, Sofia——"

"Hey. . . And now?"

"I am satisfied. I am more than satisfied, Sofia——"

She stood up. A little colour had come into her face.

"For God's sake be quiet," she said, and she walked away.

He looked at her in amazement and wondered why he was so dull with women.

"Forgive me," he said in a penitent tone a moment or two later. "I am not clever with women. I did not mean to offend you, Sofia."

"You did not offend me," she said, "but I do not want you to talk like that. I—I——" She nodded as if she had no more to say.

He was glad she was not hurt but found her mystifying. He was nervous and scarcely knew whether to remain silent or to make attempts at conversation : but his vocabulary was now a frozen affair.

After a while she said : "I will go to bed."

He looked at her strangely.

"Good night," she said ; and when she had shut her door he heard the key turn in the lock.

## CHAPTER XII

"There is a lust in man no charm can tame  
Of loudly publishing his neighbour's shame."

—ELEANORA HERVEY.

THE wise man, while appreciating big things at their proper worth, does not ignore the small. Where is the poet who gloried in the sun and despised the dawn? The child is father of the man and springs are the source of mighty rivers.

Count Bulavin was a keen man. It was a remark made by Princess Nolavof that stirred his curiosity. With feminine instinct she pierced Sofia's ignorance of Belof when that desperate man pushed his way into Stolemkin's reception. She heard his moan for "Melania Nicholovna," and expected to see the bride turn and recognize the man at once. She saw, on the contrary, that neither recognized the other. Sofia's ignorance of Belof was patent. In his case, though he cried aloud for his mistress, he did not notice her when she stood near him.

"Odd," thought the Princess, and watched closely. She considered the meeting odder still. Bulavin was by her side and watching the little drama, but, either because he had not caught the man's moan or lacked the penetrating insight, merely considered the affair curious.



The Princess, having watched the whole business, turned to Bulavin.

"What do you think of that?" she said.

"I always look for the unexpected in this place."

"Who is the man?" she asked.

"St. Peter take him! He has the air of a lost soul."

"Seemingly he is lost. He searches for his mistress—Melania Nicholovna."

"And found her in rose."

"No. He did not seem to find her at all."

"He looked as if he had been drinking."

"And she?"

"Well, what of her? Do you wish to suggest that the bride had been drinking too?"

"She may do that later, Nicholas Dimitrivitch, but she did not recognize him."

Bulavin said nothing, for he felt that the Princess, at any rate, was discussing the matter seriously.

"It is very odd," she continued.

"What do you think?" he asked curiously.

"She was exceedingly anxious to get rid of the man and sent him to Gordon, I think the name was. It seemed as if there were something——"

"Well?"

"Something very unusual happening."

It was the last phrase that set Bulavin wondering.

Away from the scene this phrase clung to him as an odd word often will. Princess Nolavof was a shrewd woman of the world, and not easily set now on wild goose chases. Her attitude, as Bulavin recalled it, was serious and impressive.

"Something very unusual happening."

Count Bulavin had, of course, precious little idea what the unusual was, but he was sufficiently interested in the marriage of Count Stolemkin's son to the Countess Puroff to feel his curiosity aroused by a hint of the mysterious.

He sent for Johan Branui who had made the journey for the Countess and come back to receive curses.

Branui came in with a nod to the ikon and one to his master.

"When you went to visit the Countess Puroff do you remember seeing a big man with red hair and beard, who seemed attached to her?" Bulavin asked.

"Big man—red hair? Yes, Excellency. And saw him here in St. Petersburg to-day."

"Ah!"

"Yes, Nicholas Dimitrivitch. He was standing near me—but he did not recognize the Countess."

"Not recognize—his mistress?"

"No, Nicholas Dimitrivitch."

"Where did you see him?"

"At Buof, Excellency. He was the Countess's steward and told us she had gone away."

"Steward! Then he ought to know her well."

"Yes, Excellency, and he was looking for her anxiously to-day."

"The devil take him! Why did he not recognize her? Eh?"

And then Count Bulavin began to think. He knew Stolemkin was capable of tricks and dodges that would amaze most, and the Countess Puroff was such a prize that a trick would be worth the playing. But what trick?

And the Princess Nolavof's words came to Bulavin again: "Something very unusual happening."

"Branui," he said.

"Yes, Excellency."

"There is something here I do not understand and I wish to discover it. If we are successful, I will reward you: if you blunder, I will have you flogged."

"I will do my duty, Nicholas Dimitrivitch."

"I want it done well."

"Yes, Excellency."

"Find this man. He was sent to Gordon—you know him?"

"Yes, Excellency. He brought the Countess to St. Petersburg."

"Bring him to me—the red-haired man, I mean."

"I thought, Excellency, it was curious when the man didn't recognize his own mistress, till I talked to Galopin, and he said it meant that either the man was drunk, or that he was not in the service of the Countess Puroff, or that there were two Countess Puroffs."

Bulavin said nothing. From the mouth of babes and foolish people the right word is sometimes uttered.

Drunk . . . not the Countess's man . . . or two Countess Puroffs. This last suggestion hinted at villainy somewhere, and where more likely than in the scheming brain of Count Stolemkin? Had he lost, and was this some desperate plan of his to win?

Bulavin felt fooled.

"Branui," he said, "go at once. Find this man or Gordon—but Gordon will not tell. Bring this

man to me or discover if the person who married Count Vasili Stolemkin was really the Countess Puroff."

"Yes, Excellency."

Count Bulavin wondered if he had really alighted on a deep-laid plot of his old friend, enemy and rival, Count Stolemkin. He sincerely hoped he had. What a *coup* if he had!

"Something very unusual happening." He blessed the Princess Nolavof for the phrase.

Branui was a sober (speaking generally) soldier, who had fought under Keith and been glad of the service of Count Bulavin. He knew Gordon, and St. Petersburg in those days—1740—was a city of big planning rather than of busy streets. The prospect was there and Peter had looked—as all statesmen should—to the future. It is when the heads of a country live too much in the present that the country decays. The present is of great value to men that are cut down like grass; states do not die, and for them the future must always be foreseen.

It was not very difficult to find a man in St. Petersburg. Belof had been a marked figure by more than one observer, but Branui, catching fleeting news of him, went to search for Gordon. He did not find him easily, for Gordon just now was not desirous of making himself a familiar figure. But Branui kept to the trail and eventually reaped success (which waits at the end of every trail!).

"Well, and what brings you here?" asked Gordon, who had just returned from his interview with Sofia and wished no further meddling in his affairs.

"Nothing, my friend, of any seriousness."

"Thank your skin for that, Johan Branui. I am not in a mood to welcome people who come seriously. The world goes upside down at times, bumpety-bump, and you scarcely know whether you are going north, south, east, west, to heaven or hell. There are prizes and scorpions about, only once again, Branui, tell me why you have come to see me, for if it is for anything more than to look at my face and ask after my pulse I shall be tempted to drop you in the Nev."

Branui laughed.

"Just to see and congratulate you, Louis Alexandrovitch."

"Congratulations, *pourquoi*, my friend, *warum*, why?"

"The Countess Puroff."

"Again, Branui; don't go skipping round the garden; why congratulate me concerning the Countess Puroff?"

"I was after her too, you know."

"You are a generous man. Did Count Bulavin pay you well?"

"Not so well as if I had got her."

"Hell of a journey, eh?"

"Pouf! Do you remember the red-haired steward?"

Gordon looked at him for a moment before he spoke.

"Red-haired steward——?"

"Yes, big man, hair all over him except on his eyes and lips and nose: had some on his nose too, I fancy."

"Eh! And what about him?"



"He is in St. Petersburg."

"Is he indeed?"

"I saw him."

"What did you talk about? Ask him how his hair was? or if he would sell you any?"

Branui laughed. He was not quite sure of Gordon's move.

"I just saw him—that was all."

"The sight was enough, eh?"

"He is a man you can't miss, Louis Alexandrovitch."

"But you can miss him. I have missed him. I should like to shake old carrots by the hand again with pleasure, but I have missed him, Johan Branui."

"Ah! He has not been here, then?"

"Are you anxious to know?"

"Not now. I know. . ."

There was a pause in the conversation, for Gordon was wondering why this man had called on him at this particular time and talked about Belof. And Branui, finding the man he sought was not there, was eager to go away.

"Johan Branui," said Gordon, "you came here for a purpose."

"To see you."

"Why? Not for my beauty, nor my wealth, nor my health, nor my prosperity, for save that my arm is still good and lusty, I have precious little else to boast of."

"For friendship."

"That be damned, Branui. You have had to ask every three copeks' worth of humanity you met where the devil that Gordon lived, and you want to

tell me you did it for friendship to a man who has just robbed you of a prize. Fie! pish! likewise tush! Johan Branui. I will give you till you have had time to mention your father and mother and a short-named saint or two, and then, if you are still of opinion that you came to see how my boots went on my feet or my shirt clung to my back and my health and welfare were generally, I will try the effect of a blow direct from the shoulder on your Pharisaic face. I'll count five, so that will give you a chance to decide whether you came here as a spy or a friend. One—two——”

Branui withdrew. He gave a gesture of hopelessness.

“It is not worth while,” he said, and was gone before Gordon could reach him.

But the interview stirred both of them. The fact was, Belof's arrival in St. Petersburg had seemingly stirred a great many people and set things unusual happening.

Branui did his best to hunt down Belof. He followed up clues wherever he found them, but did not manage to lay hands on his man.

Belof was wandering about like a man bereft. He was by this time convinced that something dreadful had happened to his mistress, and he found his way about St. Petersburg only with difficulty. Gordon was with Sofia when Belof called, and the worried man wandered afterwards like a person who is lost and knows no harbour.

Branui, wishing to let his master know how he had fared, returned to Count Bulavin and told him of the interview with Gordon.

The Count was not surprised at Gordon's attitude, for he had begun to suppose that if Stolemkin had been indulging in a trick, Gordon was a party to it.

"Who else?" he said to Branui, "could know anything about the Countess Puroff?"

Stolemkin's men were ruled out: they would either know nothing or be forced to keep silence.

Branui was not a thinker.

Bulavin himself hit on the maid.

"She must know," he said. "If we can get hold of her she will know the trick, Branui."

"Yes, Excellency."

"Get hold of the maid. Tempt her. Some maids are tempted with one thing, some with another—you can tempt the maid of the Countess Puroff, now the wife of Count Stolemkin's son, with whatever you like, so long as you bring her to me."

"Do you know where she is, Excellency?"

"I imagine she is in Count Ostermann's house at Peterof."

"If temptation will lure a maid, Nicholas Dimitritch, I will lure this one."

"If . . ." repeated Bulavin with a grin.

## CHAPTER XIII

“ Fooled !—What a word ! ”

**B**ELOF wandered disconsolately. He was like a howling dog that must be silenced with satisfaction. He was convinced that calamity was the portion of his mistress, and he sought to relieve her. The possession of social virtues, one sees, is good for the community but sometimes troublesome for the possessor. Belof's faithfulness was worrying him uncommonly. Had he been a careless servant he had feasted and drunk at Buof to the satisfying of his body and the content of his mind. Instead he ran St. Petersburg like one knowing no rest. He accomplished more than he imagined, as most of us do, whether for good or ill—*that* is the question. Zeal may be the secret of success ; it is also the parent of indiscretion. Belof talked, asking too many for the Countess Puroff.

He returned to Stolemkin's house, for every finger pointed there. When he tried a second time to enter, the lackeys laughed at him and pitched him out. This opposition seemed to him ample confirmation of the idea either that his mistress was held a prisoner in this house, or it was here he must find news of her, and he grew wilder with the idea and

opposition at the gate. The lackeys laughed at his vehemence as well as at his hair, which was an uncomely sight, especially as savage eyes glared from underneath the bushy red eyebrows. Laughter only kills the sensitive. Belof demanded muscle and cudgels. The men at the gate in a moment of laxity allowed him to secure a stout stick and have an opportunity to use it. One of the lackeys was knocked senseless and the ricochet made the other respectful.

Belof darted inside

Count Stolemkin was drinking, and not in a bad humour. The world had seemingly dealt very well with him. He had had his triumph in St. Petersburg society and established the wealth of his family successfully. He knew he was regarded with envy by his equals and with respect by his superiors. He drank to himself. But this he did constantly, for it was the custom of the age.

Belof peeping in at the door, saw the great man seated in comfort.

"*Gospodi Promilui*," he muttered—Lord have mercy upon me.

Stolemkin's pale, cold, staring blue eyes were not exactly welcoming.

Belof crossed himself and dropped on his knees.

"Excellency, I seek my mistress, Melania Nicholovna, Countess Puroff."

Stolemkin looked superlatively disdainful.

"You ungodly weed!" he said. "Are you the kind of thing that grows on a muck heap or in the desert? What do you want now? Begone before I have you thrashed. Do you hear?"



“Excellency, my mistress——”

“Why the devil do you come here? You have seen your mistress once and she sent you away. If you bring any of your dirt and madness here I’ll make you remember it as long as you have a skin to feel.”

“Forgive me, Excellency.” Belof almost crawled.

“But I have not seen my mistress since she went away with Mr. Gordon——”

“You liar! You pock-faced beast of the earth! I pushed you on your mistress’s feet not twenty-four hours ago.” Stolemkin got up and seized Belof by the throat. “Now lie to me, will you?” and he smote him on the ear.

“Excellency, Excellency! I will crawl for you, labour night and day for you if you will help me to find my mistress——”

“Well!”

Stolemkin hardly knew whether to be furious or amused. Was the man drunk, mad, or what? He let him go and asked quietly—

“Countess Puroff?”

“Yes, Excellency, Melania Nicholovna.”

“Are you mad?”

“No! no! Excellency. Try me. Ask me anything. I have come from Buof to tell my mistress that——”

“What?”

“She went away with Mr. Gordon, and after she went others came for her, and now I fear and I cannot find her. Oh! The saints in heaven preserve her! Oh, God! protect her——”

“You are mad!”

"No, no, Ex——"

"Be quiet!" thundered Stolemkin. "Stop your praying and your snivelling and your antics. Come here."

Belof obeyed.

Stolemkin looked at him critically. He could not understand the man.

"You look sober."

"Yes, yes, Excellency——"

"Be quiet. And you really come from Buof after your mistress." Then a light seemed to dawn on him. "My God!" he said with a shiver and a terrible emotion of wrath. "I showed you somebody yesterday who spoke to you and told you to go somewhere; who was that lady?"

"I don't know, Excellency."

"Don't know, by God! But it was the Countess Puroff, your mistress, was it not?" Stolemkin was feeling very cold and very hot now.

"No, Excellency. I had never seen that lady before. She is not my mistress."

The scales were off Stolemkin's eyes now. He did not jump to conclusions: he was too heavy a man to dart at the heart of anything; but he realized that something was wrong; either this man was mad, or a most diabolical trick had been played on him. He looked at Belof again.

"If you are lying——" he said, catching the poor man by the throat and shaking him in his wrath, while his eyes blazed savagely and threatened a punishment too terrible for coherence.

But Belof had the air of simplicity. There was faithfulness in all his ways and devotion in his method.

"I do not lie. Before God and the saints I do not lie, Excellency." He dropped on his knees and crossed himself.

"I do not understand," said Stolemkin quietly, feeling hard hit. "But when I do—— You say the lady you saw here yesterday was not your mistress; then what did she tell you? Be careful now. I heard her speak to you."

"She told me to go to Mr. Gordon, Excellency."

"Gordon, eh. He has sold me. Gordon, eh? and perhaps Bulavin has the real Countess——"

Count Stolemkin felt at discord with the world. Instead of being a fine man of big proportions grasping prosperity and the blessed things of life with both hands, he stood a limp, hollow creature, the sport of others, empty-handed, ridiculous.

Rage came to the rescue. It is better to feel angry than insignificant.

Yet he could scarcely assimilate all he imagined. He looked at Belof as if he would test him, and the red-headed man seemed like a faithful animal waiting for a sign.

"What does it mean?" said Stolemkin to himself, afraid of the calamity. "She sent you to Gordon, eh. The devil Gordon. . . . Have you been?"

"I could not find him, Excellency."

"Could not find him. But I will find him. I will pull his eyes from their sockets; I will reduce the villain to pulp——" He stopped and wondered if Bulavin or Frolof knew. He felt as if he had fallen into Purgatory.

He examined and cross-examined Belof, shook him,

kicked him, and was ultimately convinced there was something so wrong that it might make him the laughing-stock of the Court.

"We will find this Gordon," he said.

He went out armed, with three of his men and Belof. He was in a mood to strike down anybody who had contributed to his discomfiture. Able as Gordon was, it is likely he would have fared badly at the hands of Stolemkin and his bullies if they had met at that moment. But chance can't afford to let things happen with the precision of the tides. Gordon, disturbed by Sofia and Branui, was trying to find Glebof's men to arrange for the speedy withdrawal from St. Petersburg. (Chance was having a finger in that pie too!)

Stolemkin waited a little while and then decided to visit Sofia. It would be relishable to have the truth from the woman's lips, and he began to speculate on his price.

The woman. . . And he had paid her such attention! Flattered her so! How he cursed her! The Countess Puroff. . . Who the devil was she? And what was she? . . . But she would pay. Yes, he would get satisfaction from her. She would pay. She would repent trying to fool Count Stolemkin. But what a daring fiend. . . . It was so daring that he began to doubt Belof. *Not* Countess Puroff. . . Ah! well, Belof and the woman would be confronted and then the truth would soon come out.

It was a swampy journey and one not likely to charm the senses of any man. Peterof, with its outlook on the Neva, was pleasanter than the capital,

but the roads were bad, and to a man in Stolemkin's mood few things have the gift of pleasing.

He felt as he entered the gate of Ostermann's house that he was breaking in on a honeymoon in a singular mood. Honeymoon—the very idea was food for his rage. He still doubted Belof and trusted him by turns. The tale was so preposterous. . . .

Sofia gazing through the window saw him first and wondered.

"Your father," she said to Vasili, who was looking a dejected figure at the other end of the room.

Vasili did not know whether the visitor was welcome or not. It certainly broke the strained life he felt he was living with his wife. She did not seem to worry much. He looked at his wife and imagined he caught a look of anxiety on her face.

"My father," he said, and ran to the window.

Sofia thought the visit ill-timed and quickly her mind ran to suppositions. Vasili turned now, noticed clearly her preoccupation, and imagined it was on account of the action she had taken with respect to himself and feared the anger of his father. Our egotism will not be stifled.

So Vasili, caring for his wife, did not wish she should be treated with contumely and abuse such as his father was capable of bestowing, and yet for his own sake felt a slight admonition might be serviceable and desirable.

Count Stolemkin came in alone and saw the couple cold and anxious. He gave no greeting—at least, not one of courtesy and gladness. He stood like a man surveying a prize, contemplating booty, one in a moment of shrieking triumph.



"Melania Nicholovna." He said the words with an unction so unusual that Vasili was surprised exceedingly. His father in this mood ! It suggested presents and the giving of things.

Sofia looked and bowed quietly. She said nothing. There are women who can incase themselves in silence as the earth is protected by its atmosphere ; and they are very difficult women to handle.

"You answer to the name," said Stolemkin with a leer that was easily seen through.

Vasili looked at his father and wife. Sofia assumed a smile of ease which contained a sneer.

"Well ? " he said annoyingly.

Sofia did not reply.

"Melania Nicholovna—a pretty name, eh ? "

Still no answer.

"Well, can you say nothing ? " he shouted.

"To those who speak with courtesy. You are drunk," she said quietly.

"Drunk, am I ? You dare tell me that—you. . . Say I am drunk, do you ? You will wish you had caught me drunk and kept me drunk before we have finished with one another, my beauty."

Sofia turned her back on him, shrugging her shoulders.

Vasili, amazed, looked at father and wife and could scarcely credit the scene. His father was—yes, he believed he must be drunk.

"Melania Nicholovna." It seemed as if he had great pleasure in repeating the words, as doubtless he had, since he imagined he brought his charge to Sofia by the mention of them. "Since when have you been Melania ? " Stolemkin asked.

"My father——" began Vasili, but the big Count whirled his arm round furiously and bawled, "Be quiet, fool! I am here for your sake as well as my own."

Vasili looked at his wife as if the next move lay with her.

She was not afraid. She was moreover wondering whether the opportunity was not a good one to carry the war into the enemy's camp and hurl her weapons.

"This is a pleasant visit," she said.

"Pleasant, is it? I am glad you like it, because there will be a few more pleasanter things yet for you to go through—Melania Nicholovna."

Sofia made no reply.

"The Countess Puroff, daughter of Count Puroff—you are Count Puroff's daughter?"

"Since you have insisted on marrying me to your son, the world, I fancy, will think you should know that."

He glared at her.

"You will look pretty with your tongue cut out," he said.

"It would be a pity to cut out yours," she retorted. "You can put it to such noble use."

"Liar!" he said. "You liar!"

"Father." It was Vasili who interrupted.

Count Stolemkin turned to him quickly.

"A low, common liar—ask her who she is."

"My wife," said Vasili quickly and with spirit.

"Bah! She will be no wife of yours long, my son."

"No wife of mine——?"

"No. Ask her who she is. She says she is the daughter of Count Puroff——"

"You said that," she interjected quickly. "It was you who told everybody of my estates, and my timber and my fish and my serfs. You will remember your boasts, Anton Gregorovitch." She was warming to the theme and the moment.

Vasili was perplexed, uncomprehending.

"You admit quickly, you baggage."

"I admit you are offensive: but I presume it is your nature, and I overlook the offence of swine."

"Do you admit you are a liar?"

"I say you are a rogue and bully and fiend all in one."

"By God! Belof! Hi. . . Come here!"

Belof entered. Sofia recognized him and knew the fight had commenced in earnest.

"Is that your mistress?" said Stolemkin, pointing to Sofia.

Belof crept a step nearer—then looked round. He wanted another woman: his mistress.

"That lady, Excellency."

"Lady ——yes, *that*."

"No, Excellency. Not that lady. That is not my mistress."

"And your mistress is Countess Puroff?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Have you ever seen this—woman at Buof?"

"No, Excellency."

"Did Gordon take her from there?"

"No, Excellency."

"That will do. Wait outside."

When Belof had retired Stolemkin assumed the

attitude of a man who had removed preliminaries from his path and is now ready for desperate work.

"What a piece of damned fraud you are ! You heard the man Belof, Vasili ? He is Countess Puroff's steward and has come to find his mistress This baggage has palmed herself off on you as Countess Puroff ; do you understand ? "

Vasili was certainly beginning to understand.

"Is this true ? " he asked his wife quietly.

She did not answer.

"Sofia . . . "

Still she was silent.

"Will you not tell me ? " he asked.

"She will not, because she dare not," shouted Stolemkin. "She is some rag-tag from the byways that has thrust herself on us for a purpose. But she shall be flogged and you must divorce her at once.

"Divorce," murmured Vasili, looking at his wife

"Yes, divorce. What creature is it you have married ? Some slut——"

" Father ! "

" By Heaven ! I'll floor you if you dare to say a word to defend a shameless liar like that ? "

"I wonder," said Sofia, speaking quietly, as if she had made up her mind to go through with a desperate venture, " what the Court will say. . . . What will Princess Nolavof and Count Bulavin and all the other people say, eh, Count Stolemkin ? "

He looked at her in amazement.

"She is a great prize—Countess Puroff," continued Sofia.

It was Stolemkin's turn for amazement now. No one can foretell his next emotion.

Vasili was dulled to some extent by the inextricable tangle of his sensations. He loved Sofia, and she was a fraud. And now she showed a courage that he had rarely if ever dared to display before his father. And courage in the vilest will rouse almost universal admiration: courage in a loved one bids ecstasy arise.

"What the devil do you mean?" said Stolemkin. "I wonder you dare hold your head up."

"Estates in Livonia, Revel, Ukraine and Moscow. Jewels to surprise a Court; wood——"

"By God! woman, do you know you will be flogged for this?"

"But I shall hear you laughed at first."

"You viper! you scum——"

"You almost made love to me yourself, Anton Gregorovitch. You remember you said it was almost a pity to waste my figure on Vasili——"

"There is one consolation: you will lose your tongue. They cut them out of the mouths of liars."

"And let them grow in boaster's, to have a double dose of fun, eh?"

"I'll flog you myself, you gipsy baggage. Who are you and what are you?"

He was amazed at her defiance.

She hesitated a moment as if she considered her action. But she was warmed to the business. She was encouraged by the excitement of the moment and nerved by a reckless disregard of consequences, engendered probably by her life in the woods.

Count Stolemkin moved restlessly as he spoke. He



came near to her, walked away, advanced towards her savagely, turned his back on her, while his hands and arms moved restlessly.

Sofia, on the contrary, was very composed in her attitude. She rarely stirred and never once looked at her husband.

Vasili had looked from father to wife, but now fixed his gaze on Sofia. She fascinated him. He could not understand. He really did not mind that she was not Countess Puroff with the estates, and jewels and wood and fish and serfs, of which he had heard so much. She was what she was and he loved her.

"The son of Count Stolemkin," she said, "was to make a brilliant match. . . . I will tell you who I am."

She paused.

"Get on, you miserable creature!"

"I shall go fast enough, Anton Gregorovitch, I feel sure. Baggage you call me." She shrugged her shoulders. "Slut, eh?" She flushed a little. "You are used to hogwash, you swine!"

He looked as if he would strike her, and Vasili trembled like a leaf in the breeze. But he checked himself.

"You will rue, madam. By God! you will rue."

"But not half so much as you, Count Butcher. You shall know who I am and why I came to St. Petersburg and entered your foul slaughter house. "Do you remember your steward—Glebof?" He did not answer. "One victim more or less is nothing to you, eh? But he was an honest man, and kind and good, that I know."

"A fool and a rogue," he muttered.

"Neither—you lie." It was the first time she had raised her voice.

"Let him rest and get on with your tale," he said.

"Let him rest," she repeated. "You sent him to his rest; do you remember? He was flogged to death while you stood by; do you remember? Well, I mean to repay some of those stripes. You shall feel what it is to suffer. Now you may know who I am. I know you will writhe and squirm and curse and rage when all your friends know what has happened. It is my turn now, you butcher. I hid, but you will never hide the sight from my eyes, while you cruelly killed my father——"

"Your father, Glebof."

"Yes, I am the daughter of Peter Glebof."

"A clod. The daughter of a clod. Earth, dung—do you learn what you have married, my son? This is the offal you have got for a wife?"

"Father, do not call her that." Vasili was learning courage from his wife.

"I determined to level you, Butcher," said Sofia. "I came to St. Petersburg to marry your son to spite you."

"Sofia!" said Vasili with a groan.

"Be damned to you for a fool!" said Stolemkin in a rage and knocked his son down with a blow.

Sofia's eyes blazed. She turned and picked up a heavy brazen candlestick and with all her force struck Stolemkin on the head.

He fell like a log.

## CHAPTER XIV

“When Truth comes home, he always returns with booty.”

COUNT STOLEMKIN had never been treated so in all his life. Knocked down by a woman! . . . Abimelech all over again.

His men took him home, having been called in by Sofia, who did not seem to mind whether it were a corpse or a live man taken out. The big man revived quickly and swore abundantly. He had thoughts of returning to Ostermann's house but desisted. He had seen strong women, but one who could hit like that was a wonder. Phew!

But she would pay. He would—yes, he would and would and would. It was something excruciatingly painful that he sought, the agony abiding long, but it was indefinite. Flogging was good, even excellent; then the cutting of the tongue, and then Siberia. She *was* a vixen. . . .

And what a devil to do as she had done! The daughter of Glebof! A peasant's child married to *his* son, to a Stolemkin!

More curses! This was indeed most galling. In itself such a *mésalliance* was bad enough, but after the boasting, it was worse than falling from a cupola of Saint Sofia's.

His rage was Titanic.

He felt in a sense helpless. Marriage is such a fast business. Of course the road was open by divorce, but that meant publicity, and publicity was just the thing Stolemkin desired to avoid.

The cursing went on intermittently.

Married to the daughter of a peasant. He strode about furiously. . . . Estates in Livonia—peuh! More striding.

But Stolemkin had no wish to shirk the business. He was a full-blooded man, hot and strong. He ate well, drank well, hated well, grabbed well, and cherished his desires immoderately.

When he was a little calmer he envisaged the situation better. He sent his men to watch Ostermann's house at Peterof so that Sofia should not escape, and Belof to find Gordon and keep an eye on him, while he sat at home to prepare a plan of campaign.

He was very mixed in his thoughts, for Sofia had surprised him by her daring, the confession of the plot, and above all, by the blow on the head. But vaguely at first and then definitely the essential came to him. There was hope if he played his cards well. His object was to marry his son to the wealth of the Puroffs, so now two things were necessary instead of one—the divorcing of Sofia and the finding of the real Countess Puroff.

The definiteness of the plan sobered him: it gave him something tangible to think of, something clearer than vague curses and unaccountable wonder at a woman's wiles. Phew! But he could not forget her. Hitting him like that. . . . Glebof's daughter,

too. . . . She was—she was—no, she was inexplicable—damn her !

He looked at his head in the glass. . . . And to think she could hit like that ! . . .

He reverted to the plan. He was much better when he ceased thinking of Sofia, for she raised a tempest in his emotions, whilst the contemplation of a plan of action made his thoughts run evenly and his blood calmly.

Gordon, he saw, became of prime importance. He was a rogue, a villain, and a hundred other names not all of them mentionable, and Stolemkin wondered why he had done it. Why had Gordon lent himself to this vile imposture ? He had seemingly left with the real Countess and then changed her *en route*. So he knew where she was to be found. This was a fact to be cherished.

Stolemkin began to grow calmer still as he thought over things, for he realized that rushing wildly on Gordon might defeat his ends. Gordon had, of course, run grave danger and incurred severe penalties for being a party to this imposture, and in St. Petersburg they knew how to deal with criminals. No damned nonsense. Cut their backs in ribbons or break them on the wheel—— Gordon would not be gay when he realized what would happen to him, if he did not at once bring from her hiding-place the real Countess Puroff.

Stolemkin drank to himself and his scheme. He imagined he had won and that all would yet be well with him and purgatorially ill with Glebof's daughter. A man with a plan of his own conceiving is prouder than a woman with a child.



Stolemkin decided to call on Gordon at once. There was no time to be lost if Countess Puroff were to be discovered and brought to St. Petersburg.

He ordered his carriage.

His friend Count Bulavin called.

"*Mier ejdom Zjeiewoesonon.*" Peace be in this house and among the living who dwell in it.

Stolemkin considered the visit untimely and did not want Bulavin's peace. He invited him, however, to drink strong English beer and gave him a chance to see the Wedgwood ware.

"Well, Anton Gregorovitch," said Bulavin, "do you not feel lonely?"

"Why?"

"Through losing your son."

"You did your best to get rid of yours, eh, Nicholas Dimitrivitch?"

"Not to get rid of him."

"Too precious?"

"He has at any rate the makings of a man."

"A chip of the old block!" He forced a laugh.

"Besides, an advantageous marriage covers a multitude of shortcomings."

"A multitude, eh?"

"An advantageous marriage, friend. The Countess Puroff—you look gay," Bulavin said untruthfully.

"I feel it," retorted Stolemkin with equal untruthfulness.

"You do well. Your daughter-in-law is a fine woman."

Stolemkin grunted.

"Remarkably fine woman."

"Um-m."

"Country air, eh?"

"Possibly."

"Are you not proud of her, Anton Gregorovitch?"

"Devilish proud," said Stolemkin almost savagely.

"You would have been, eh?"

"But I lost, old friend. Lost the jewel—so fresh looking, too. What a prize even for the son of Count Stolemkin!"

"As you say, what a prize!"

"And all due to foresight, energy—— I take my beating in good part, eh?"

"Excellent. I wish you were not quite so good. It is no pleasure beating a man like you."

"I am lost in admiration. I no longer think what I missed or what you gained, but what a prize! It was whispered you would have liked to marry the maid yourself."

"Eh—to the devil with their whispers."

"Vasili might have looked elsewhere, only there is such a danger of odd coupling nowadays, eh? And Countess Puroff, with estates in Livonia, Revel—what is the catalogue?"

"I expect you learned it off by heart and said it oftener than your prayers, till some one else grabbed it, Nicholas Dimitrivitch."

Stolemkin was not enjoying this conversation one whit, but Bulavin was a curious man and dangerous opponent, and somehow Stolemkin felt uneasy and was in the mood to watch for straws—even if the dust blew in his eyes.

"And what a grab! Estates in Livonia, Moscow, Revel; jewels to dazzle the courts of Europe; fish to feed an army—a big catch, eh? And all with a

girl—Countess Puroff. Suppose Gordon brought you the wrong girl! . . . Phew.”

“What do you mean?” Stolemkin glared but feared to be too angry.

“I said suppose, my friend, suppose——” He shook his head. “Too awful.”

“Too ridiculous,” snapped Stolemkin.

“Yes—for you, eh.”

“No, for you, Nicholas Dimitrivitch. The supposition is ridiculous. Upon my oath, but you almost make me rejoice openly to you that your man did not bring back Countess Puroff.”

“While yours did, eh? . . . Rejoice! It is a small thing. Still, those estates, those jewels, those fish, those serfs—and still let us suppose, just for the zest of the thing, for the jest even, that Gordon brought back the wrong woman . . . Phew.”

Stolemkin did not like this. He began to wonder if Bulavin had heard rumours. But he was a stout man before his enemies.

“I can imagine,” he said, “the envious and the mean and those who would garner where they did not sow saying all manner of stupid things. I can even imagine them saying my son has not married Puroff’s daughter.”

“Would they go so far as that?”

“Envy makes men go very far, Nicholas Dimitrivitch.”

“It does. It would send them to—well, to Buof, eh, for a slip of a girl. . . .”

“It would also send them to the devil.”

“By the saints! it would. And yet, you

almost fill a man with envy when you talk of your daughter-in-law's possessions."

"Don't go to the devil, Nicholas Dimitrivitch."

"It is a task to escape him these days, eh? I suppose you know that wherever one goes now in St. Petersburg the talk is all of your daughter-in-law and your — luck!"

Stolemkin grunted.

"Countess Puroff owns this and that. Stolemkin has won again—et cetera, et cetera."

Stolemkin grunted uncompromisingly.

"By the by, you remember the red-headed man who appeared at your feast like an untimely visitor?"

"Well?"

"Odd, wasn't he?"

"Very."

"Such a curious case. A man from the country pushing his way into your house at such a time."

"He happened to be one of Countess Puroff's men," said Stolemkin, his throat getting drier; and he had no desire to stop Bulavin now as he itched to hear all suspicions that might have been roused by Belof's appearance.

"One of the Countess's men. . . . Been a good deal with her, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

"Ah! . . ."

"The Countess has a good many men?"

"So I have heard: thirty thousand serfs scattered, I suppose, amongst her estates in Livonia, Ukraine, Moscow, Revel. But this man was at Buof, was he not?"

"Perhaps."

"Only perhaps? I heard he saw his mistress depart with Mr. Gordon."

"And who told you that?"

"I heard it."

"Do you believe all you hear?"

"No. Not all. In fact, I disbelieve a good deal of what I see, for it is not difficult to be taken in, and then one looks such a fool."

Bulavin went away with some glee. He had satisfied the natural spirit within him to dig Stolemkin in the ribs, and he had found ample confirmation of his supposition that Stolemkin knew all was not well with the marriage. But he had not succeeded in settling for himself the further question: was Stolemkin a party to the imposture or merely a victim? He left that for another day.

Stolemkin hardly knew what to make of the visit. He cursed wildly, not only Sofia and Gordon now, but Belof and Bulavin. He flung his wrath on Belof for the moment, and yet he recalled Bulavin's words, "It is not difficult to be taken in," and remembered also the concluding sentence, "and then one looks such a fool."

No man looks a fool gladly. It is easier to suffer pain than ridicule. Stolemkin felt no time was to be wasted if he were to get vengeance on those who had tricked him, and stop the floodgates of laughter opening in St. Petersburg.

He would see Gordon at once and wring the truth from him. His carriage was at the gate and he drove away immediately.



When Sofia knocked Stolemkin down and saw he would give no further trouble for some little time, she turned to look at Vasili. He, dazed a little by the blow, was getting up, so she stayed where she was, holding the candlestick, her breast heaving with the excitement, a flush on her cheek.

Vasili was pale, with a red blotch on one side of his face. He too was breathing heavily. He turned his attention to his father and when Count Stolemkin had been taken away, Vasili came to his wife.

"Sofia," he said, and he spoke with a ring in his voice that she had not heard before: like some chord rarely played, for it needs great inspiration.

"Yes," she said. Her voice occasionally wavered, but never her eyes.

He looked her bravely in the face, not timorously, nor as one who pleaded and sought favours.

"Is this all true?" he asked.

"What? That I am not or was not Countess Puroff? Yes."

He looked at her as if to read her soul, not for reproach or anything selfish.

"And my father had your father flogged to death."

"Yes."

"I am sorry for that."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"But did you marry me just to spite my father?"

She hesitated. He spoke with feeling and she knew that fact had hurt him. But she was not used to diplomatic answers and tactful turns of speech. She looked at him unfalteringly.

"Yes," she said.

He showed his blow clear enough: but he also

manifested a look that was rarely seen in his face. It spoke of hidden depths, of things covered over that a crisis might bring to light.

He slowly turned his back on her, and as he entered his room she had an impulse to call to him, but did not.

The next moment she heard the key turn in the lock.

## CHAPTER XV

"There is a fatal Fury in your visage  
It blazes fierce, and menaces Destruction."

—Rowe.

GORDON came full tilt on Belof, as the latter, weary, with wide searching eyes, crossed the road opposite Gordon's lodging.

The Russian was exuberant to success. His emotions stirred him to feats acrobatic and wild. He shouted, wept, clasped Gordon closer than a brother, and muttered incoherencies.

Gordon was glad to see him.

After a series of hectic exclamations Belof managed to speak intelligently.

"My mistress, Countess Puroff—where is she? Melania Nicholovna?"

"Be quiet, you town-crying oriflammus son of Hercules! You don't want to tell all St. Petersburg and those that dwell in ships on the Neva what your business is——"

"But my mistress."

"Oh! Come inside and bottle your shrieks within the four walls of my room if it's possible."

Belof's cries—little ejaculatory barks—accompanied them to Gordon's room. The appeals were renewed here, and Gordon put his fingers to his

ears, and then waved the tempestuous Belof to silence.

"You are worse than the importunate widow. I don't wonder at the poor old judge now. Can't you keep your mouth still while I ask you the time o' day and crack a word in your ears? Man! but you are big—and red! And you have made a sensation in the capital that you did not anticipate, I warrant. That's the man from the country all over."

"My mistress, Mr. Gordon, Melania Nicholovna——?"

"She is——" Gordon paused and steadied his tongue. This was not quite the theme on which to trip with gaiety. "I hope she is well," he said fervently.

Belof looked startled.

"Hope," he said, and would have added more but that Gordon put his hand on the steward's shoulder and said—

"Yes. I also believe it. She is being saved from disaster."

Belof was inclined to the incredulous, for he had gone through so much he was now afraid of being cheated.

"I do not understand. Where is she?"

"There are a good many things we don't understand in this world, my bully boy, and women, God bless 'em! are amongst the number: and things may be all right and sailing straight for Paradise Gates in spite of our non-understanding, while we are whirling about in Hell's rapids. Don't worry, my Knight of the Golden Fleece! Countess Puroff is well—or by God!——" He shuddered. "Paff! We won't

worry. She is well, and it is for her peace of mind I am here."

"Thank God! Thank the saints!" Belof first embraced Gordon and then fell on his knees and thanked as many saints as he could remember. When he got up he asked quickly—

"But where is she? Take me to her."

"In good time. I will race you when the time comes, my friend. But my ruddy man with the gorgeous torch, I have a fear you have disturbed the peace of this mushroom capital. Heaven keep a weight on the soul of blessed Peter! What have you been doing? I hear you have been going to and fro in the earth doing all manner of foolish things—did you not go to the wedding?"

"Wedding—yes. But that was not Melania Nicholovna."

"No. And do you think she would have been enjoying herself there? As the bride-man, do you understand? Do you think she would have been happy as the bride of Stolemkin's son?"

He did not understand. He stared as if bewildered.

"I must tell you," said Gordon, "for you have come at a curious time. You are a kind of Guy Fawkes without knowing it. You might have had us blown to pieces if I had not caught hold of you now. But tell me: what made you come to St. Petersburg at all?"

Belof told of the arrival of the other two emissaries and of his journey to the capital to warn his mistress.

Gordon took him by the hand.

"I can trust you," he said. "A man who will do that for his mistress is on her side; but don't spoil



the cake by putting in too much sugar. A word of warning or the ghost of Banquo with about a thousand others will disturb your rest and mine till the worms get our body! Keep your mouth shut. The flies can't get in then. You know nothing. There isn't a more ignorant person from the Caspian to the Baltic than yourself concerning Melania Nicholovna if anybody asks you impertinent questions. Understand? Put bolts and bars on your mouth. Keep it shut. Wax it. . . . Um!" Gordon shut his own.

Belof looked more dazed than understanding.

"You don't grasp it all?"

Belof shook his head.

"Then I will tell you."

"Please," said Belof pathetically.

"Well, that boisterous ruffian Count Stolemkin, whose house you invaded as easily as a flea creeps in your sheepskin or Charles the Twelfth entered a foreign country.—Heaven blessed the earth when a man like that was born—and yet he was an uncanny fool! . . . Well, Count Stolemkin wanted to marry his son to Countess Puroff for the sake of everything but herself. You understand that? For her estates, her wealth—you see that?"

"Yes."

"Good! One stone at the time—that's how St. Petersburg was made, eh? Well, Countess Puroff did not like the idea. Neither, to tell you the honest truth, good Belof of the heavenly hair, did I. But I could not say so. Only by the kind intervention of Providence a pack of—peuh! um. I think if I gloss a little here I shall do better. The prophet

Nathan didn't tell everything at once. It was decided to marry some one else to Stolemkin's son. Now does the sunlight penetrate your faithful if tough head ? ”

Belof waited.

“ Very well, I will be clear. Some one else pretended to be Countess Puroff so that the real one, Melania Nicholovna—*your* Melania Nicholovna—should escape the Stolemkin grip. Now do you understand ? ”

“ Yes, yes. Wonderful ! ”

“ It is. Most wonderful ! But it will be more wonderful still if we get out of this town with whole skins, now that you have come.”

“ I—I——”

“ Yes, you. It is always you good folk that kick up the rumpus. It was the good brother who didn't go eating things with the swine, and doing other jovial tricks of that kind, that started upsetting the feast when the fatted calf was killed. And you may have done us all an infernally bad turn.”

“ I. But I would not.”

“ Would not ! All the way through life we do the things we would not and open wide our eyes when we see the idiotic things we have done. When you invaded Stolemkin's bridal party like a Tartar chief did you not ask for Countess Puroff ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And when you saw the lady who was saving your mistress's happiness you said, ‘ That is not my mistress,’ or some such swallow-your-luck phrase, did you not ? ”

"I did. Oh! I am very sorry. I did not think. I did not know——"

"Of course not. I am not going through the Ash Wednesday services for your disturbance. I merely want you to understand. Luckily, the lady got you to depart like Jehu in the chariot; but now you see, we want to get out of St. Petersburg as quickly as possible, because we go from here to Melania Nicholovna."

"Ah! I may come too. I will not speak another word. My mistress, Melania Nicholovna. . . . I was so afraid. . ."

He babbled more and tears ran down his honest cheeks.

"With men like you," said Gordon, "Pultowa was as certain to come as the sun was to rise after Narva. But now we want no more bungling, or we shall be lucky to end as Saul and Jonathan did—and there are lots of kings and kings' sons whose exits fire me with no ambition of emulation. So, Paul of the Evening Sun, silence. A discreet silence. You must say nothing. We don't want St. Petersburg to know yet what has happened. We want to be in the company of bears and fir trees, and the gorgeous steppes and a free and easy wind, before these civilized folk in the capital learn of the trick that has been played on them. Understand? The silence of the dead." Gordon put his finger on his mouth.

Belof nodded. Holding the truth in short fashion, he did not mind embroideries of speech.

Gordon smiled.

"I may sound gay," he said. "I fancy it is

because I feel I am somewhere near the edge of the Tarpeian Rock : and it is in situations like that I am always gayer than usual, damme ! ”

“ When shall we go ? ” asked Belof quietly.

“ As soon as we can. No gum arabic nor spices nor myrrh nor gold will keep me in this city longer than is necessary, now that you have sounded the tocsin. We have to get the lady who pretended to be Countess Puroff out of the place, do you see ? ”

“ Ah ! Yes, yes.”

“ And when we can do that we will go at once.”

“ Why not go now ? ”

“ I am waiting for the message from the escort. Things don't go in Russia with the ease that this old earth turns on its axis. There is always somebody or other dropping in the ditch at the critical moment, and as I was not to make the arrangements for the escort, but merely to take Sofia, Countess Puroff by adoption, and wife of Vasili Count Stolemkin by marriage, to a spot to be told me, I wait. Yes, I wait with your message doing its glorious work. . . . But we will be all right shortly, good warm Belof. We will soon be shaking our livers to good use on the roads outside St. Petersburg—on the roads that lead to Melania Nicholovna. . . . God preserve her ! . . . ”

And then Count Stolemkin marched in.

He looked eminently business-like, as if he were full to the brim of his subject and determined to play his part to the best of his ability. His thick neck seemed a little redder than usual, and his blue staring eyes stared their widest. He was just about to say something of a preliminary nature to

Gordon, when he caught sight of Belof, and his eyes seemed to go bluer and his neck redder. He advanced a step towards Belof and said—

“ You, eh ! ”

Belof was about to say, “ Yes, Excellency,” when Gordon’s warning to silence came to him. He shut his lips tightly.

They were three fine men physically. Belof was biggest, but Gordon was the lithest, most muscular, most forbidding. He had the stance of the man who knew his strength and was confident. Stolemkin was a big man in a fury, tempered by discretion. Gordon had clearly the gift of tempering.

The room was plain, and without much ornament. Two cheap tapestries covered one wall: a few trinkets gathered by Gordon in his travels were on the top shelf of a book case, the other two shelves containing books. There was an ikon in the corner—the property of the landlord—and an oak table and rush seated chairs were the rest of the furniture. These were merely Gordon’s quiet lodgings. It was certain that Stolemkin had come in anger and yet, now that he was in the presence of Gordon, he felt the need for coolness. So he spoke with much less fury than he had contemplated. In fact he was surprised at his own calm.

“ Birds of a feather or the duper and the dupe or what, Louis Gordon ? ”

“ Or what, Anton Gregorovitch ? ” replied Gordon, with the air of a man unawed.

“ It is a virtue.”

“ That can be overworked.”

“ And then becomes of most use.”



"Well, you will probably need it."

"It is for that I rejoice in its possession."

"Um. You know this man?" He nodded his head towards Belof.

"Appearances certainly point in that direction."

"A steward of Countess Puroff, eh?"

"He has the appearance of a good one."

"And he seeks his mistress, Louis Alexandrovitch?"

"Many have done the same thing."

"But some with more success than he has got."

"It is an uneven world: one eats caviare, another starves. That is life."

"One gets broken on the wheel, another is beheaded—that is death," said Stolemkin, with a grim nod.

"We must all die," retorted Gordon pleasantly.

"Not all eat caviare or get broken on the wheel."

"I may congratulate myself. I have had caviare."

"And now await the wheel, eh?"

"Fortune's wheel is ever turning."

"Exactly. One is free to-day, but in prison to-morrow."

"And out the day after. It is a merry world, Anton Gregorovitch."

"For those who live."

"Of whom I am one."

"There are dangers in life."

"They are for the weak and craven."

"Also for impostors, aiders and abettors of impostors."

"The audacious have no fears."

"Not till it is too late."

"And then it doesn't matter."

"You are as able with your tongue as I imagined. You reply as well as you invent."

"You would probably be glad to discover half as well."

"I fancy I have made the discovery."

"I congratulate you."

"I have already seen this man." He pointed to Belof, "and, if you would know more, the lady you pretended was Countess Puroff. Do you wish me to tell you more of what I know?"

"It would doubtless be interesting."

"Then I will. I know your trick, and now perhaps you will see the dangers that await you."

"I have encouraged a habit of circumventing dangers."

"And yet most habits have their weak moments."

"Not till they have occurred."

"Well, I have come, Louis Alexandrovitch, to tell you plainly that your villainous plot is known to me, and you shall suffer all the pains and penalties I can secure for you—unless——"

"Unless?"

"You do your utmost to right yourself and me."

"Unless, a blessed word, Anton Gregorovitch. And I am not in a humour for a bargain?"

"Then you will put me in a humour for getting you clapped in prison."

"To think and do are not quite the same thing."

"You doubt me. Don't be a fool. You know what you have done, and that Count Ostermann will see you are broken on the wheel for it. If you refuse the terms I offer you, I will show you no mercy."

"I do not ask for it."

"Don't you value your life?"

"Only under decent conditions."

"Well—I make no hard conditions. Tell me what has happened to Countess Puroff. Tell me where she is. If I get her and she marries my son I will not pursue you—you will have time, so far as I am concerned, to get out of Russia."

Gordon shook his head.

"I fancy you do not realize your conduct or your position," said Stolemkin.

"That is possible."

"You will be flogged—that is certain, if I denounce you."

"But will you denounce me—that is the question."

"There is no question. Either I get my desire or my revenge. You are not so stupid as not to see that."

"But if you denounce me you hold yourself up to the ridicule of the whole country. Denounce me and every lackey will have sore sides at the thought of you. You will be the most successful topic at dinners and feasts that has been invented for a generation. People will cease praying: they will just say Count Stolemkin and Countess Puroff and then laugh till the next morning. Denounce me . . . put yourself on a ship's mast for gulls to screech at. . . Denounce me. . . every tame bear in Russia would hug you for it, for everybody would give them delicacies through sheer joy."

"By God!" said Stolemkin, losing his calm. "You talk like that, do you? That's how the vixen talked. But I'll have your tongues split. You

think I am afraid to tell because people will say I have been taken in by a rogue. That may happen to anybody, particularly when you were considered a man fit to meet with men of honour."

"And still fit," said Gordon with a steel ring in his voice. "All the Saints in Heaven would be taxed to number the cruelties you have practised. To flog a man to death is honourable,"eh? To trick him, a shameful thing. To Hell with your honour and your sense of it. You would filch the last herb from the widow and orphan and call that honourable, yea clever; but to be tricked yourself you look upon as next to blasphemy, as dangerous regicide."

"Paid, Mr. Gordon—paid to do work and——"

"No, Damn your money," said Gordon, "There it is, packed counted and ready. I wash my hands of so honourable a man as yourself. Take your money," and Gordon flung a bag of gold, that lay on one of the book shelves, on the table.

"You think to get out of it that way," said Stolemkin, "but you won't. If you tricked me, you also tricked the Count. Do you think Count Ostermann will be your butt? Can't you see yourself tortured before you go to the wheel or to the block or to Siberia. You talk like a maid in a fury: have you no sense?"

"Enough to enjoy a joke."

Stolemkin paused a moment. He was beginning to realize that Gordon was not to be so easily won to his assistance as he had imagined. He thought him a fool of course. He couldn't understand such madness, for torture and death were certain,

if Ostermann handed the prisoners over to the Secret Court of Police—*Preobrazhenskaia Kant-seliaria*.

Yet Stolemkin knew to what Gordon trusted: that he (Stolemkin) would not face the unhappy position of dupe. But the desire for revenge will make a man do odd things; and hate can be as reckless as love.

Bargaining was essential if Stolemkin would emerge from the business with credit. If he could secure the real Countess Puroff, and Vasili divorced his present wife, Stolemkin could tell the story with content, for his emerging from a trying situation with such glory would approach the heroic. Yet Gordon's help was almost a necessity. Where was Countess Puroff?

Stolemkin felt thwarted, and yet knew that threats had not availed. So while neither shrieking or hiding penalties he tried other methods.

"Tell me," he said to Gordon, "where Countess Puroff is. Tell me that. I think I deserve so much."

"It is not your merits I think of but hers."

"What have merits got to do with it?" And then he looked at Gordon with added emotions. Amazement knocked out curiosity and anger quashed tact. "You devil! You——"

Gordon moved towards his sword and drew it.

"A little moderation Excellency."

"Moderation for you? Now I see your villainy. You have the audacity of a brigand you——"

And then he realized the use of Belof and turned to him. "You know this man?" he shouted.



Belof, bewildered by the two men's talk, said nothing but looked as if "Yes, Excellency," were on the tip of his tongue.

Stolemkin did not heed the silence.

"This man," he waved a chubby hand towards Gordon—"took your mistress, didn't he? Do you know where she is? Eh?"

"No, Excellency."

"No, who does? He has her hidden somewhere, and do you know why? He wants to marry her himself. That's his little game. He has your mistress hidden somewhere and instead of seeing her married honourably according to Her Majesty's wishes to my son, he hides her and would marry her himself."

Belof looked alarmed. It sounded dreadfully like trouble for his mistress. He looked at Gordon enquiringly.

"He raves. Don't pay any attention to him," said Gordon. "The words are coming out like the water at Horeb with no sense of proportion. He has been struck."

"Yes, and by Heaven! you shall be struck. You wretched mercenary!" He turned to Belof again as if instinct warned him that he might attract this man to his side. "A pretty thing for your mistress to be held in bondage by a man who was paid by me to do my work. He holds her a prisoner somewhere, so that he can marry her by force."

"You lie."

Gordon spoke so quietly it seemed quite a strange tone to interrupt Stolemkin's furious flow. But it was as if the speaker spoke his minimum and

maximum in one. Action was clearly to follow. Gordon's sword was shaking in his hand.

Stolemkin looked at him hatingly, but respectfully. He did not wish to begin a fight from which he had nothing to gain : not that he was afraid, for Stolemkin did not lack courage.

Belof crept into the pause.

"My mistress—is it true?" he asked almost tenderly of Gordon.

"You heard me say he lied?"

"Yes—but—but——"

"Don't worry, Count Stolemkin talks like a man on burning logs. Your mistress will never marry, if I can do anything in the matter, except where she desires. I am for her welfare. Count Stolemkin is for his own."

Belof gave a cry of thankfulness.

"Thank God! Thank God!" Belof was like a child in the simplicity of his affection.

"And now," said Gordon to Stolemkin, "I think we can bring this interview to an end."

"You refuse your chance?" asked Stolemkin, feeling no gainer by the meeting.

"What chance?"

"Bring Countess Puroff to me and you shall have opportunity to get out of the country."

"And if I refuse the advantageous and generous offer?"

"Then you will wish you had taken it : you will wish you were dead, for you will die in torment."

Gordon laughed.

"And you only wish I would come to terms with you, Anton Gregorovitch. But I won't. I did

once, but I refuse a second time. Take your money, take your offer, your chance, your help and every cursed thing that belongs to you elsewhere. Out of your clutches, Countess Puroff may have a chance of happiness, but in them, I would as soon trust a hungry wolf to give joy to a lamb. Torture for me eh? Catch me, Anton Gregorovitch. Catch me. Tell your tale in St. Petersburg and there isn't a man who wouldn't hinder you and help me. Wish I were dead, shall I? You will wish you were on the side of those that laugh. Good-day, your Excellency, good-day."

Stolemkin withdrew in as fine a fury as when he entered. There was wild business afoot.

## CHAPTER XVI

“Look down, you gods  
And on this couple drop a blessed crown.”  
—*The Tempest.*

COUNT STOLEMKIN'S position had features in common with that of many men restrained by the imponderable manacles of expediency. Desirous of wounding and yet hesitating to strike. It robs desire of its life: joy is knocked out of opportunity. To smile while we hate may be excellent discipline: it is execrable feeling.

Laughed at, derided, braved first by the daughter of a peasant and then by—by an adventurer! (He did not forget that he had also been knocked down by the woman!)

To a man in such a situation sympathy is superfluous aggravation. He wants deeds—deeds desperate, gory, cruel, but at least to gratify his desire upon his enemies.

And in the meanwhile he hesitates to mention to others that these people are his enemies or that he has any at all, or even that he rages. A very galling situation!

Stolemkin in his room continued his raging. Cursing cheered him a little but accomplished nothing. He wanted schemes now, and he had a grave

dislike to inviting official Russia to a knowledge of his plight. He did fear that howl of laughter. Boasting has its inconveniences. Nature has a wonderful way of balancing things.

A Scheme! A Scheme! A Fortune for a Scheme!

Stolemkin tried to look the affair not only full in the face, but round it and at every angle. His great object was to secure the person of Countess Puroff before she fell in the hands of Bulavin or Froloff, or anything equally disastrous (from his point of view) happened to her.

He grew irritable, for no reasonable scheme entered his head. His brain was boggling at the whole business. In the ordinary way he would have ordered Gordon to be flogged till he confessed. Or Sofia—Stolemkin was not particular. But they were neither his serfs nor chattels, and that way was barred unless—he managed it very discreetly, or he could get an order, say, from Count Ostermann.

It was an idea. There was no time to be lost. Bulavin had the appearance of one who prepares to crow. Now suppose Count Ostermann were delicately approached and made to see that the trick was contempt of him, contempt of the whole Court, and his anger were roused——

This seemed a promising channel. The sails of Stolemkin's thoughts filled with wind and his ideas scudded with the breeze. Yes, Ostermann dragged in would give power, if only he would not rob Stolemkin of the prize. Ostermann was powerful and recognized the Russian maxim: "See that your office keeps you." But could he trust Ostermann?



A shaky trust! Stolemkin had grave doubts. No wonder he was worried. He was half inclined to try torture—a little persuasiveness that was all—on his own account on Sofia, say. Why should she not confess? Or he might try bribery? But he recalled her attitude and motive. He cursed old Glebof for dying, taking no blame to himself in the matter.

He grew more irritable still, for he was clearly of opinion that either Gordon or Sofia must help him, and he could find no way to make either of them his aid——

It was trying!

Then he thought of his son. His despised, beaten son appeared to him as the one person who could aid him. The brutal father rubbed his fat hands with unctuous satisfaction, for a son owed his father obedience, devotion, etcetera, etcetera. Particularly a son like Vasili! He wondered why he had not thought of him before. Vasili could worm the secret from his wife and then pass it on.

Stolemkin ceased to feel irritated. He drank more beer, and ordered some men to keep a strict watch over Gordon and not to let him go out of St. Petersburg under any circumstances.

Now Gordon and the woman would see whether their bravado would help them——

Vasili—the woman's husband too! Really, it seemed as if the laugh was to be on the other side after all.

Stolemkin patted his chest (metaphorically). These plotters would find they had played a trick on the wrong man!

Neither did Gordon feel comfortable.

When Stolemkin had gone he turned to Belof.

"He is a brute, Belof," he said, "a callous brute. I would never had done his business had I known what it all meant, and I am glad to have had it out with him. There are plenty like him. If you don't hit when you have the chance somebody will hit you—that's life, Belof. Caviare and diamonds or stinking fish and mill-stones round your neck. But now we want the open country and Countess Puroff."

"Yes, yes, Melania Nicholovna, let us go to her at once," said Belof, to whom all else were dead sea fruit or the eating of ashes.

"I wish we could. But it is no use our going unless we take the other little lady with us, and she has the nerve of a lioness and won't be frightened out of the place. That is the worst of women, Belof : there is no middle way with them. Heaven or Hell and no rest for your back anywhere else. No second best—not when they are worth anything—for them. All or nothing. The middle folk lot are only jelly fish—Heaven or Hell. It's a good motto. It happens to be mine, Belof, and Sofia, daughter of poor old Glebof, is as fine a woman as ever was the Empress Catherine, and the Tsarina couldn't hold a candle to Sofia for virtue."

"And Melania Nicholovna—you will not forget her ? "

"Forget her ? . . . I will go and see if I can meet our messenger from Glebof. Stay here till I return. Forget her——" muttered Gordon to himself with memories unforgettable in his heart.

Sofia was not desperate, but the non-arrival of

Gordon with news that all was ready for the departure disturbed her.

She and Vasili had their meals together, but he had spoken little since he had learnt who she was, and that she had married him merely to trick his father.

She endured the silence without reproach, feeling that Vasili had a grievance. He, however, could not resist her presence altogether, and attempted casual bits of conversation that were wholly without reference to themselves or their feelings. He did not even ask her plans, and was himself beginning to be very curious concerning them. She caught him in silent moments looking at her fixedly and began to ask herself unexpected questions. Somehow she did not get the buoyant and full-blooded joy out of the business that she had anticipated. The trick on the father was exquisite: the trick on the son was a different affair, and grew more different with the passing of the hours.

The reader will not forget that Vasili and Sofia are man and wife on their honeymoon! Sofia thought little of this aspect of her case as she had much else to think of. But Vasili considered his position ruefully. Yet somehow he regretted nothing that he had done: he did not regret the marriage, and looked at Sofia every now and then, even while he tried to maintain an attitude of manly dignity, with the eyes of a lover.

He asked her wishes and studied her comfort in a restrained, respectful way—as if he would fain be more enthusiastic, more joyous and warm, but must be as he was for his manhood's sake.

"Do you require anything?" he would ask.

"No—thank you."

He felt the situation was tending to lead them towards the impossible: a crisis of some kind must be reached soon.

The day Stolemkin conceived his idea of persuading his son to interrogate Sofia, she was growing restless. She waited now with eagerness for the message to come from Gordon that all was ready for the journey. She had agreed to wait for the signal since the preparations were being made by others, otherwise she would have got her husband to engage horses and a carriage. The non-arrival of the message and the attitude of Stolemkin were disturbing factors of no negligible kind.

As Vasili was about to leave her she said:

"I am waiting for a message from Gordon."

"Yes."

"If he does not come or send soon, I should like to know what is happening."

"Do you wish me to try to communicate with him?"

"Can you?"

"I think so."

"I shall be glad."

"At once?" he asked.

"I will wait till the afternoon," she said.

He bowed slightly and remained, as if he would prolong the conversation or the contact somehow in the hope it might lead to something better.

"You are anxious?" he asked.

"It is time I heard."

"There is danger, of course," he said, realizing

from her attitude that actual danger was there, rather than some vague threat of his father's.

"There was always that."

Vasili began to upbraid himself for his dullness. He had been so disturbed by the slight to himself that he had not really grasped the extent of the danger she ran. He forgot himself almost at once : he was the perfect lover.

"Sofia."

She almost trembled. She was wearing a dark green velvet robe with a belt of gold. She put her left hand to her breast at the music of Vasili's tenderness.

"Yes," she said in a guarded voice, emotions of various kinds toppling over each other in their haste for expression.

"What will happen ? "

"I do not know."

"But it may be serious—very serious."

"It may be," she said calmly now.

"Prison—oh ! "

"We—I shall escape," she said.

He looked at her strangely again : as if he would fathom her heart and know his own strength at the same time. The "we—I" touched him. It was the kind of thing to stir a man in love. "We—I," it was more than he could grapple with. What did she mean? Would she go without him? Married him for a trick and would now leave him. . . . This was contempt! And yet, Vasili had seen a look that told him to hope, and Hope is the most faithful of a good man's friends.

Vasili ventured : "We, Sofia."



It was her turn for the look of wonder. She looked back at him with wonderful directness: she seemed in a mood for giving or asking.

"Do you wish?" she asked.

He came closer to her.

"Yes," and then he stood still with deference and waiting and a great patience.

She had both hands on her bosom now.

"Now that you know all," she said, "are you angry?"

"Angry." He almost shouted the word in derision and her heart went beating to the accents. He laughed oddly, so oddly that she went paler and longed to be extravagant.

"Sofia," he said, "I love you."

"Even now?" There was a quaver in her voice she had not dreamed possible with her. Love can search at the depths of us and all our secret places.

"It makes no difference," he said.

"Had I known——" she began.

"Well?"

"I would not have done it. But he—my father."

"Sofia, I love you." He was still gentle and not daring, assuming an attitude of deference.

She sat down and looked at him in wonder. This was so different from the blood-spilling life she had seen for so long. Vasili was no cut-throat such as the men she had herded with. War and brigandage were businesses of the day and, if one lives with butchers it is ridiculous to be surprised at the sight of blood. Besides, rough language, rough ways, contempt of life, no shirking of cruelty, the absence of courtesy and all things gentle were the

setting of her life in the woods. She had not minded : she did not mind those things now. They had a tone and savour when Count Stolemkin came to bluster and boast. But with Vasili and the ways of love they had nothing in common. It was a change gigantic, striking awe.

A peasant's daughter and a brigand's sister, loved by this tender Vasili.

"Let us forget," he murmured, as he came to her, putting one knee on the ground.

She put one hand on his shoulder : he seized on the other and kissed it. Her bosom heaved and she felt like a penitent with almost mad resolves.

She was not weak, and had suffered too much and seen too much to behave like an ordinary woman. But she was tingling. The hand on Vasili's shoulder gripped him like the claws of an eagle. He stared at her caressing her hand. She was too moved to speak, and tears were not her outlet.

"Sofia——" He was not over eloquent himself.

She looked at him with eyes magnificently bright—stars in the blue were like flakes of snow, lifeless and feeble beside Sofia's eyes, said Vasili afterwards.

She did not speak and he did not mind, for he felt equal with the angels. He got up and put a hand on her head and stroked her hair, while she breathed like a race-horse.

He wanted to kiss her, but his spirit was weak and his frame a-dancing.

She suddenly gripped him tight with both hands.

"By God ! you are my husband, Vasili. You are mine, Vasili. I will have you. I will be your wife."

"Sofia, Sofia," he cried, his voice beside the high

resolving note in her sounding feeble, but as true as the tender rapier.

Then she kissed him.

It was he who wept for joy and looked wildly to Heaven as if he had been told the tales of mysteries.

And when they were in this humour—with fairies dancing round him, at any rate—Stolemkin burst upon them in his wrath.

They were together, Vasili beside her, his face like the Saint on a Rafael picture, just the kind of thing that the big Stolemkin, with his eyes on things that served the stomach, could not appreciate.

"Get up, you fool," he began, the very attitude lashing his fury.

Vasili got up, not because his father bade him, but because the attitude of a lover is not for show. When it is, it would be a tough job to find the love.

"I want to speak to you alone," the big Count thundered.

Vasili hesitated. Thunder had less effect on him than had been its wont. He gazed at his father with more confidence (an enraging attitude to a man like Stolemkin) and then turned to Sofia.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "Not if you do, Sofia?"

For an moment she was tempted. She felt she could have scored off this bully if she had set his son against him; and to do that were an easy thing now; but she was subdued a little—not in courage but in temper. Love is the great alchemy.

"You would like to talk to your father?"

"Y-yes."

"I will leave you."

She walked slowly towards the door, ignoring the Count as if he had been a serf, while Vasili accompanied her, opened the door and looked, when he returned to his father, as if his treasure were outside the room.

Stolemkin was astonished. After knowing that the woman was the daughter of a peasant and had only married for spite, Vasili treated her like that.

Stolemkin's face got redder.

Vasili faced him with unprecedented courage.

More alchemy.

## CHAPTER XVII

“ The best may err and the most cautious fall.”

STOLEMKIN was clothed in blue to-day, dark blue with enamel buttons. His linen was choice and he looked a sturdy man in his ample calves and big shoulders.

He approached Vasili almost menacingly, as he had ever done.

“ That baggage,” he said, “ that pest of a noi-ome—— ”

“ Father ! ” said Vasili, white but still.

Stolemkin looked amazed. It was clear expostulation.

“ Name of a Saint ! what are you fathering about ? What do you mean by cuddling close to that scum of a woman as if she were a fit mate for you ? ”

“ She is my wife.”

“ Your wife—that besom ! Yes, but by all the names of the stars she will soon cease to be your wife—— ”

“ I hope not, sir.”

Stolemkin stamped on the floor like a giant. He looked at his son and then strode nearer grabbing him by the arm fiercely when he was within reach. His son Vasili the sheep-like creature, talking to him like this !



"She will soon cease to be your wife," he repeated slowly. "Cease to be your wife, do you hear? You dare to hope not. By Heaven! do you want to be glued to a cat from Hell? What!" He shook his son, as he might have shaken a young sapling; but somehow he did not shake the look from Vasili's eyes and his son was not the son he had been.

Stolemkin did not notice all these things at once. Tyranny generally makes the tyrant blind until it is too late for him to have his eyes opened for any use.

"Glebof's daughter—the spawn of a peasant! You know who and what she is?"

"Yes."

"You look strange, my son," said Stolemkin with a little discernment. "What the—phew! Has she been trying her witch tricks on you? A woman, eh? Because she has a fine breast you are like a babe at the milk. Bah! There are hundreds of fine women in St. Petersburg, you booby. Leave the spawn alone. I'll crush her to a jelly. Has she told you where Countess Puroff is?"

Vasili did not answer speedily.

"Did you hear?" shouted Stolemkin.

"Yes. No, she has not told me."

"Then I want you to get the tale from her. That is what I have come for. Do you want to be the sport of St. Petersburg? Married to a child of one of my own men. By Heaven! but she shall pay."

Stolemkin strode angrily, as if roused to fresh fury by his proximity to the author of his worry.

"What has she told you?" he suddenly asked.

"What about?"

"About herself—about her damned trick?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, eh? Keeps it to herself, I suppose. But what in the devil's name were you sitting beside her for? What are you? A Stolemkin? She's spawn, she's scum—a baggage, worse even."

"Whatever she is, she is my wife."

"Your wife. . . . Be quiet, you fool! Do you think she is always going to be your wife? Am I to be tricked by a besom like that? I'll see her flogged to ribbons first. And what do you mean by saying she is your wife?" His aspect was fierce.

"I—I don't like to hear you call her names."

"Ha! ha!" It was a tempestuous outburst; but there was no jollity in it. It was scorn gigantic and piercing. Stolemkin was not genial even in his irony and he dropped from the grinning note to one of fury. "You don't like to hear her called names. Who cares for what you like? You will hear what I like and when I like, and I will give you twice as much as you don't like if you defend that rotten egg. You splinter shanks! You——ach!" He pushed his son violently, and Vasili tottered half a dozen yards.

Stolemkin was in one of his choicest moods, no doubt stirred by the affectionate attitude in which he had discovered Vasili and Sofia. He went on muttering: "Baggage—fool—his wife——" and his snorts and notes of contempt were both varied and plentiful. He sobered at last as even the hottest must.

"So she has told you nothing, eh? Well, you understand the position, don't you?"

Vasili did not answer.

"Do you hear?" bawled Stolemkin.

"I understand that I am married," said Vasili quietly, and the very calmness of the answer seemed to stir the father's wrath to fresh boiling. He gazed at his son in wonder.

"She's witched you," he said. "You lamb! you mere child of a man! All women are the same the first time you—pah! What a son! You haven't got the strength of a basin of soup. Letting a woman like that get hold of you. By Heaven! sir, have a care. Leave that woman alone—except as I bid you. I want to know where Countess Puroff is, and that you must get from her?"

"She may not wish to tell."

"You must make her."

"If I cannot?"

"Cannot! You are all cannot. If you must cross a town you are afraid. You fear to meet a woman, but having met her you fear to leave her. Be a man! you heart of a fish. Be a man! My stars! That I bred such a creature!" He looked contemptuous. Vasili was silent, feeling that perhaps he was a poor thing of a man but conscious of something he held beautiful.

Stolemkin turned to his son again.

"Perhaps, after all, your ditch-crouching style will serve as well as another. But you must get the information from her. It is vital, you understand?"

"Tell me the information you want."

Stolemkin detected in Vasili's voice and bearing a difference and it annoyed him. He was about to

burst forth in anger once more, but a remembrance of the futility of that method in this house checked him. Besides his son had said nothing disrespectful.

"We know now who the baggage is," he said. "You are not a fool over that. She is a common lump of mud, and you married her because she passed herself off as Countess Puroff. If you don't want every postboy in St. Petersburg to whistle at you as you pass, we must find the real Countess and get her to St. Petersburg before anybody else gets hold of her, you understand that?"

"I understand what you desire."

"You are really bright at last," sneered Stolemkin. "Now this vixen knows where Countess Puroff is, but she may not wish to tell. She will have to tell eventually if she has to be flogged to tell, so you can think of your heifer's back looking like a piece of meat in a butcher's shop if you don't get this information from her peacefully and speedily."

"You will not hurt her, sir?"

"Not hurt her! . . . You white-feathered soul! I would tear her limb from limb for trying to make me the laughing-stock of the Court. I may spare her a little—she may be spared torture altogether if she will give the information we want. But, by Heaven! if she refuses, she shall pay. Phew! How she shall pay!"

"If she tells, what will you do?" Vasili asked eagerly.

"That is my business."

"And not mine, sir?"

"No, not yours, sir. You will do as you are bid. When we have got the real Countess then we will divorce this baggage, see her whipped, and marry you to your proper wife."

Vasili was white. He hesitated.

"I do not want her to be hurt," he muttered, feeling the strokes already.

"Do not want her to be hurt," repeated Stolemkin with boisterous mockery. "Get the information from her and change the colour of your yolk, you skin of an egg."

Vasili was not a courageous man: so much is admitted. But bullies are not courageous. It is easy for the big to threaten the small; but the feeble who fears and yet dares has the spirit of the God of Courage.

"I would save her," said Vasili. "I will ask her—but I cannot divorce her."

Stolemkin was inclined to be contemptuous. He felt in the humour to disregard all his son said so long as the object he came for was attained. And all his life he had made Vasili do as he wished, so he did not easily contemplate opposition.

"Cannot." He sneered openly. "But you will," he said, scarcely looking at his son as if the decree settled the matter.

"I cannot," repeated Vasili, urged by some brave little fairy within him to take a stand for courage and love.

"You will do as I want," said Stolemkin. "You will get what I ask for out of this woman, or I will have her flogged so that you shall not know her, and you shall divorce her if I have to marry you after-



wards to one of the army hags that is up to her eyes in sores."

Vasili was breathing fast and his face was drawn.

"As long as I live," he said, "and as long as Sofia wills, I shall be her husband."

He said it with a burst. He had screwed himself up and his head was in the clouds. White as a corpse, trembling with emotion, he had at last the courage, not of despair, but of resolution and duty. It is a fine attribute. Stolemkin came towards him like a bull. His great fat neck was swollen and red and his big hands closed on Vasili's throat. He shook his son: shook him again and again. Vasili was pale and listless, for he had no idea of attempting physical opposition—the other had been enough.

"You dare? You miserable wench of a man! You dare tell me you will not do as I want? I will shake the life out of you."

"Father," Vasili gasped, and for the first time in his life attempted to prevent his father doing him violence. He tried to pull the hands from his throat.

"Father!" shouted Stolemkin. "You infernal fish!" and then he threw him on the floor with a heavy thud.

He looked as if he would like to continue violently now he had begun, for his hands moved restlessly and he looked at Vasili not as a parent, but as a task-master with a recalcitrant slave.

Then Sofia came in, and her eyes sought Vasili at once. She turned to the father with a courage vastly different from Vasili's. Here was no deference, no apology for the attitude, no regret for the

opposition, no submission, but a look of fight, of invitation, equality. It was surprising perhaps in one of her birth, but some stiff-necked nomad, who looked to the sun and a stout horse and kissed no other man's foot, probably ran in her.

Stolemkin took stock of her speedily and noticed a fine long dagger in her hand.

"So, baggage! that is your game," he said.

"What is yours?" she replied.

"My God! you——"

"Mine was you."

"You match yourself against me? Pouf! You will find yourself with a raw back one day, my viper, and that day will come sooner than you think."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Have they begun to jeer yet at Court?" she asked calmly.

Vasili wondered at such braving: but the spirit had been knocked out of him early and it takes time and much encouragement to tempt courage back to the feeble.

Stolemkin looked as if he would rush on the girl.

"You have not felt the knout, eh? It tickles, girl. The mud will come from your blood then."

"Did you come to tell us this, or to try and frighten your son?"

"I came to give you a chance."

She pointed to Vasili.

"Is that what you call giving me a chance?"

"I came," he said, "to save you torture. Tell me where Countess Puroff is and——"

"Well?"

"You will probably avoid the knout."

"Do you take me for a fool?"

"Most rogues are fools."

"Then you are a wretched mixture," she retorted quickly.

"Don't try those tricks of words on me. I will tell you, woman, what I mean to do. You are a prisoner here and will remain one till I find Countess Puroff. If I get that lady in my hands, you may get off lightly: if you help me, I will do my best to get your punishment light. If you refuse, I shall lay before Count Ostermann the details of your imposture. He will be furious at you, for he has put his house at your disposal, and a flogging, the loss of your tongue and banishment to Siberia will then be the least punishment you can hope for."

Vasili groaned.

"Hear the maid! He doesn't like the prospect. Now you know what I mean to do you will, perhaps, tell me what you know."

Sofia paused a moment. Vasili looked at her pleadingly, as if he would persuade her to do all she could to escape the awful doom that threatened her.

"Suppose I tell you," she asked, "shall I—we—be free to go at once?"

"I—we," he repeated as Vasili had done; but he did not notice his son's radiant look at Sofia's correction, nor did he reproduce it. He jerked his head up with a sneer and then checked himself. After all, he wanted the information.

"You may lie to me."

"If I tell you then, you do not mean to let me go?"

"I must be sure I have Countess Puroff first."

She paused.

"Suppose the Countess were brought to you—but I could not trust you," she suddenly said.

"Yes, yes," said Vasili eagerly.

"Be silent!" shouted Stolemkin. "If you will arrange for Countess Puroff to be brought to me, I will give you my word that you shall go out of this house where you will."

"I do not trust you," muttered Sofia, as if conning the thing in her mind.

"There is the alternative," he said.

"I do not happen to be afraid," she retorted a little proudly.

"It is unpleasant, the knout. It cuts—it can kill."

"Sofia!" said Vasili.

"Well?"

"Save yourself, if you can."

"I do not trust him," she said, pointing to Count Stolemkin.

"She shall go free," said Vasili, "if she tells?"

"If she brings Countess Puroff to me," he said.

"Telling—that is not enough. In that case she waits till the Countess comes."

"I will think it over," she said.

"I cannot give you long: there are others on the scent of this business."

"How long?" she asked.

"Twenty-four hours."

"It is short—but I will see."

Stolemkin turned to his son.

"Think of her back if she keeps stubborn and remind her of the feeling when the salt goes in."

Then he went.

When Vasili and Sofia were alone he turned to her, asking—

“What will you do?”

“She put her hand on his neck.

“He struck you,” she said.

He felt imparadised by her tenderness.

“It was nothing,” he said.


She looked at him with softened eyes that told a tale of other things than flogging and imposture. He did not remember to have seen expressions like it before—his mother had died when he was a child—but he understood it well enough. Only those on whom affection is wasted miss the love look in the eye.

He put his hands very gently on her shoulders; the air of a man tender and delicately constituted.

To her he was something so out of the common, so unexpected, that the realism of what he was disturbed her immoderately.

She flung her arms round his neck.

“Kiss me,” she said.

He kissed her, not wildly, delicately and as one granted a heavenly favour. But she kissed him passionately. 

“My husband! my husband!” It was she who was in love now. “You are sure you are happy, Vasili?”

“I have never been so happy.”

“And you forgive me?”

“There is nothing to forgive. I count myself lucky.”

She pressed him passionately to her and held him for some moments before she spoke.



"I do not deserve it," she said. "It was his fault, Vasili, my husband, my love."

"I will be whatever you want me to be," he said, scarcely master of himself, so whirling were his joyous feelings.

"Yes—yes. You are a saint—a gentleman. But we must get away, dear." She looked in poise for action now. "Your father will act."

"Yes."

"We must act first."

"What shall we do?"

"My brother was to arrange for my departure, and I await his messenger. But we cannot afford to wait now. We must arrange ourselves. Gordon will do it."

"I will tell him."

"Yes. But at once. I suppose there are men here to keep me a prisoner?"

"We will fight them, if need be."

"We can trick them. But we must leave this place, leave St. Petersburg, get to the woods." She paused. "But you, Vasili," she said tenderly, "how will you like the woods?"

"If you are there I shall be happy; and where you are not, there I shall not wish to be."

She came very near to tears. To be loved as Vasili loved her was more touching than anything she had ever experienced. But she mastered herself.

"We shall be safe there, at any rate," she said.

"Then we will go: they must not take you, Sofia."

"Will you go to Gordon? They will let you pass perhaps."

“ Yes. If not, we can send Marie.”

“ Yes. She went out this morning to call on an uncle, she said. Marie is a fool, still she will serve if she has returned.”

“ But I will go, Sofia : they will not stop me.”

“ Tell him to prepare at once to go. We want a carriage, and in some fashion I must leave here either by ruse or force. Only it is expedient we leave at once.”

Vasili went : it was the woman the men had been told to keep a prisoner. But when Sofia went to look for Marie she did not find her.

## CHAPTER XVIII

“Through perils both of wind and limb,  
Through thick and thin she follow’d him.”

—*Hudibras*.

VASILI went out as he had rarely marched into the streets. You would scarcely have recognized him again. There was vitality in his walk and purpose in his eye. He was not of the swaggering order, but there was about him an air of “I am Somebody” (somebody loved and loving perhaps—a wonderful thing, this love . . .).

He had a job to find Gordon’s rooms and was lucky to catch him crossing the threshold.

They got to business at once, for Gordon was quite alive to the seriousness of his position and Sofia’s. He had been out seeking Glebof’s messenger and failed to find him. (That poor creature was lying in a ditch twenty versts outside the confines of St. Petersburg with a cracked skull. Life became a risky thing if a man moved from town to town in the brave days of old—and not so very old either.)

Gordon shut the door of his room.

“Vasili Antonovitch, what does this mean?” he asked. Gordon was struck, not only with the presence of Vasili, which suggested things out of the common, but with his demeanour. That was dis-

tinctly out of the common. Love had put its seal on him in other ways than uxoriously, as was to be expected with one of Vasili's sensitiveness. He dared where before he feared; he entered where he used to stand and wonder. That was the love beaming in his eye. Vasili was approaching manhood at a gallop.

"It is Sofia—my wife." He mentioned the last proudly, not explanatorily. A pile of thoughts came crowding over Gordon. Vasili was not such a fool as he had appeared. . . . What has Sofia been doing? . . . This is no simpering bread and milk child. . . . He will be a husband and a man after all. . . .

These and kindred other ideas came to Gordon as Vasili looked, stood and talked.

"Eh—well?"

"We would leave St. Petersburg at once."

(Note the "we").

"Trouble, eh?"

"Yes. But some one was to come?"

"Aye, Vasili Antonovitch, there is always some one to come in this hotch-potch world, and generally somebody who doesn't come; haven't you noticed it?"

"No. But it may be true——"

"Phew!" blurted Gordon, "it is easy to see, some one has come for you."

"Louis Alexandrovitch, she must be saved. It is my father."

"The old wolf is on the track, is he? And does he ignore the cackle? Or is he just bluffing?"

"He knows all. He knows who Sofia Petrovna

was, and he swears she shall be punished unless he finds out where Countess Puroff is."

"Where Countess Puroff is? What the devil does he want to know that for now?" Gordon became a little more anxious now.

Vasili shrugged his shoulders, new man that he was.

"He hopes for a divorce and a remarriage." The tone was exquisite. Old Stolemkin would almost have had a fit in rage and astonishment at it. Vasili was treating the tyrant and bully of a lifetime to sheer pleasant contempt, and thoroughly genuine in the bargain.

There was no need for Gordon to ask Vasili what *he* thought of the Count's idea, for it was betrayed so handsomely in the tone. He looked at Vasili in admiration and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Vasili Antonovitch," he said, "the day of miracles is not past. You have been born again. You are a new man. What is in your veins, Vasili?"

"Fire—but you know."

"Aye, by the saints! I know. Praise be to Heaven and Mistress Sofia. But this is rich. I feel as if I had met a companion who could lead when I was tired." He repeated Vasili's phrase with a little exaggeration in the utterance. "He hopes for a divorce and a remarriage. That is uncommonly good. I never thought to see this day come to you, Vasili, and may I be forgiven for trying a trick on you?"

Vasili held out his hand quickly.

"It is a trick I shall not forget," he said. "I shall always be grateful."



Gordon was silent for a moment, Vasili's magnanimity being out of the line of the average fighting man. He gave voice almost involuntarily to another idea.

"What would have happened if it had not taken you like this?" Gordon said, and jerked his head as if he nodded back to imagination's salutation.

"But now," said Vasili, "it is the present that counts."

"It always is, and the past—damn it! on occasions, and sometimes the future," said Gordon. "But for us it is the present, Vasili, my hero. How to get out of St. Petersburg—that is the problem, eh?"

"With my wife."

"Yes, with your wife. Well, as perhaps you know, I wait for a messenger from Glebof——"

"Sofia's brother?"

"Yes."

"Can we wait longer? Time presses and I know my father. If he cannot win he will have vengeance."

"We cannot wait," said Gordon. "I almost fear we have waited too long already, and that is one of the common mistakes, my friend, of those who fail. In the camp and the court as well as in dealings with gentlemen—forgive the allusion—of the nature of your esteemed sire, it is always well to choose the proper moment for action. We must cover up our dallying as well as we can. To-night at eight o'clock I will have a carriage outside your villa at Peterof; can you manage to come outside?"

Vasili hesitated.

"I am allowed out, but my father has placed a

number of men round to prevent Sofia Petrovna from escaping."

"They must be tricked," said Gordon.

"A mistake," said Vasili, "would be serious."

"It often is. But we must risk it. Leave it to me," said Gordon. "I will come somehow with a plan and a carriage and you must be prepared to leave the instant I arrive."

"We shall be ready," said Vasili, speaking like a man of mind and moment.

Gordon was refreshed and encouraged by Vasili's demeanour, for he felt he had now a man to stand beside him, one fit for emergencies, a companion in arms.

But the prospect was none too agreeable, even with a new-found comrade to aid one, for Stolemkin *père* was thorough in his methods, a willing striker and hard. Gordon realized it was not a mere affair of driving up and away: but that surprises must be the lot of one or the other.

So far as his opportunities permitted he was prepared for much: that was clear. Stolemkin was anxious to retrieve his position by capturing the real Countess Puroff, and then woe to the *farceurs*! He hopes "for a divorce and a remarriage." . . . Well, there was one obstacle to the divorce in Vasili, and there must be more than one to the remarriage. Gordon was stirred. The webs that were being cast to entrap Melania Nicholovna could not leave him unmoved.

A plan . . . Sometimes easier to suggest than to carry out: sometimes easier to execute than to imagine. It was to take Sofia Petrovna, Vasili her

husband, Belof as well as Gordon himself, out of St. Petersburg. It was a wild prospect before them, for if Stolemkin moved and the Crown moved there would be little chance of pleasantness in public places for any of the chief aiders and abettors of this plot.

T't—Gordon's tongue worked. The maid Marie. . . She went with her mistress to Peterof. She must be taken away too. The maid—one more or less did not matter. . . . But Gordon allowed his thoughts to dwell on Marie, not so much as an extra passenger, but as a decoy, a dodge, a device to delude Stolemkin's watchers. . . . It might act. . . . It was a pity he had not mentioned it to Vasili, for then they could have arranged matters. . . .

It was perhaps a greater pity that Gordon did not know that Marie was not with her mistress at Peterof, though luckily she had little part to play in his plot.

Gordon got his idea at last and he nodded his head and um-umed. He sought out Belof and made sundry other preparations.

The evening arrived.

Vasili and Sofia were ready. He was alert with his eyes to the windows, his ears sensitive to every sound. She was calm, unworried, and looking very capable.

"Your maid—it is strange," Vasili said.

"Yes. Probably your father's doing."

"Probably. And she knew all?"

"Yes, all."

"Even where Countess Puroff is?"

"Yes. Yet your father did not speak as if he had got any information from her."

"Perhaps she had not told."

Sofia shrugged her shoulders.

"She was no good—a squealing thing. It would have been better to leave her behind, only I had to have somebody, and she knew all. Yet, for her mistress's sake she will be silent if she can."

She spoke the last three words ominously.

Vasili repeated them : "If she can . . . poor girl !"

"She blubbered in the forest," said Sofia. "If they take her by the arm she will tell."

"The sooner we are out of here the better," said Vasili.

Sofia did not speak : she did not find it necessary to repeat the obvious. Certain economies made her strong, as they do with most people. It is always distressing to see people pass over from frugality to meanness in any direction. Inane gabblers like prodigal spendthrifts have their counterparts in taciturn curmudgeons and the loathsome miser.

As the minutes passed and eight o'clock drew near, Vasili and Sofia, while maintaining an air of serenity to reassure possible spies in the house, betrayed an anxiety to each other. Vasili was at times almost uncontrollable. At the sound of anything unusual he showed an eagerness latently violent. To pass it off the next moment he became altogether too boisterously jolly. He could not keep up this rôle for long and broke off suddenly to listen and peep in undignified angles and at unexpected corners.

Sofia beckoned him with a little toss of her head.

"Your pistols ?"

"I have them," he said.

"Merely in case they are wanted," she said.  
"Be careful. Give me one."

He let her choose.

"And your sword," she said. "That might be more convenient."

He drew it with an eye of joy. At last, he considered he had something in the world he could fight for. A glorious day, if the fight is for nothing mean or sordid.

They waited together, not speaking.

A woman came in to ask what time they would take supper. Sofia said at nine, and asked to have a salad of mushrooms and onions, a dish she was fond of. This sent Vasili in great joy, which he was perforce bound to control. Sofia's supper dish of mushrooms and onions tickled him immoderately: he thought the jest excellent.

"Sh!" It was Vasili who spoke, and he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

Sofia beckoned him back.

"Wait," she said. "Get out the cards." He obeyed her without question.

When the man came to announce visitors, Vasili and Sofia were apparently much interested in a game of cards.

A tall cavalier with a moustache and beard and a rather short priest, also bearded, were shown in. The bigger man spoke and said that he and Father Nusoff had been emboldened to call on their illustrious hosts, because having heard the son of Count Stolemkin and his beautiful bride were in the neighbourhood, and knowing how sympathetic to good works they would naturally be and well disposed to-



wards the labours of those who—— “ Do you think you could quietly go to that door and see if nobody is behind it ? ” the big man asked of Vasili in a whisper too low for human ears outside the room to catch.

Vasili, stirred to expectation's height, turned with a beaming face on Sofia, who pressed his hand to stay his exuberance.

“ Go quickly,” she said.

“ We have formed a home for the lost,” continued the big man in a big voice again, “ that is, Father Nusoff and I, and we sincerely trust that we may be able——”

As Gordon's voice rolled out its periods, Vasili opened the door and saw they were unwatched, at least, from that quarter.

“ All right,” he said, as he closed the door.

“ Then there is no time to be lost,” said Gordon, and after showing the priest into an anteroom he took a false beard and moustache from his pocket and tried them on Sofia. Vasili smiled, Sofia merely said : “ Will they do ? ”

“ Excellently,” said Gordon. “ I have an extra cloak with me and you will disguise yourself as a priest and go out with me. If we get away then Father Nusoff will go out by another door, and he has agreed on the price for his chance. Your husband may follow after we have been gone five minutes.”

There was a slight pause.

“ It will do,” said Sofia.

“ It is the best I could do in the time and under the circumstances, and there is every chance of success,” said Gordon.

"They will never suspect," said Vasili. "And I will follow in five minutes?"

"Yes. Let us get safe through and then come after us. We will wait for you at the quay. But don't delay, Sofia Petrovna——"

"I will be ready in a moment," said Sofia quietly, and she went in an adjoining room to change.

Vasili, now the desperate moment had come, looked elated and anxious.

"You think we shall escape?"

"It was easy enough to get in."

"Yet my father is strong."

"Men are only strong till a stronger comes."

"If we can escape. It is she I am thinking of, Louis Alexandrovitch."

"I know it. I know what it is to think of—somebody."

"Ah! You too——"

Sofia returned at that moment, and Vasili, taken unawares, did not know her. She was a priest to beard and boots.

"Capital," said Gordon, and then Vasili threw up his arms.

She caught his hand.

"In five minutes," she said, and Gordon was amazed at the ring in her voice. A lioness fearing to be robbed of a cub could not have put more passion in the tone.

"In five minutes, my Sofia," said Vasili.

She was still holding his hand fiercely.

"I shall not go without you," she said.

"I will come," he said with the voice of the happy lover, "though I must jump the Neva."

She looked contented and was so sure that she felt no need for demonstration.

"While we go it would be as well if Marie, the maid, remained in this room," said Gordon, "so that her shadow might be outlined against the window."

"Marie has gone," said Sofia.

"Gone? Where?"

"We do not know," said Vasili. "She went away yesterday and has not returned."

Gordon whistled.

"Gone? . . . " He whistled again and added: "Then the sooner we go the better."

The big man and the pseudo priest went out together. Sofia had no mincing drawing-room walk, so the rôle came easy to her. At the gate Stolemkin's men advanced and peered. They crossed themselves.

"Peace be to you, my Father," said the leader.

Sofia nodded and made a sign. It was an anxious moment, and Gordon hung back for an instant in case of a suspicious arrest. But none came. The next minute—it was barely more—a carriage dashed up.

"Ours?" whispered Sofia.

Gordon had not time to speak: he just grabbed Sofia by the arm and with bent head and big increasing stride pushed her at a sharp angle across the road, whilst he immediately assumed a walk, odd and unrecognizable.

"Stolemkin," he murmured when they had gone a few yards.

"What an escape!"

"Yes, make haste. We must run."

The gathering darkness made that possible. The big man, alert as usual, with his abundant energy, had evidently determined to lose no chances, and had either come to secure his guard or attempt once more to break Sofia's silence.

What an escape!

Sofia did not speak. She had the right instincts in crises of this order. Her life in the woods had begotten in her a spirit of calm in danger and speed of decision. She also had the invaluable quality of obedience when that was better than commanding—most people must either be altogether one or the other and inevitably suffer in consequence.

Gordon guided her towards the quay. The streets were wretched and respectable folk were careful of travelling abroad when dusk had fallen, for drunken men abounded in these drinking days and killing ceased to be a crime, for it was so often merely an accident or a blunder.

Fortunately Gordon had tact and a stout arm.

"The carriage," he said joyfully.

She seemed unmoved—but that was merely her custom. Belof was there, a mountain of anticipation and delight: the postboys were astride the horses.

"Tricked him!" said Gordon, but before he could utter another word Sofia said, "Vasili, my husband?"

It was a pride as glorious as Vasili's.

"He will be safe—they will not hurt him. We had better go," Gordon said. This, of course, had been the original plan and Gordon believed that

Vasili, at least, would be immune from Count Stolemkin's wrath.

But Sofia stood like a post.

"I will not go without him," she said.

"You must," said Gordon.

Sofia did not answer—or move.

Gordon read her then. He knew argument was useless even though he tried it. Hope can overcome experience and knowledge as a sunbeam crosses a mountain. Then he marvelled. It was the oddest and most unexpected of climaxes—Vasili, Count Stolemkin's son, and Sofia, daughter of Peter Glebof, Stolemkin's murdered steward, were in love with one another and prepared even to do what lovers often assert (and don't mean)—to die for each other.

"Then we must save him," said Gordon.

Sofia drew her pistol.

"Be careful," said Gordon. "We don't want Stolemkin's pack in this direction."

Sofia simply looked the way she had come and listened.

"They are coming," she said, her quick ears catching the sound.

"Go," said Gordon. "In any case, hide. I will find your husband."

She did not move. Maybe her life had trained her to keep to the trail, and now that passion possessed her she recked of nothing but her desire.

Gordon pleaded and became almost angry: it seemed to him a wanton flinging away of opportunity fraught with disaster to them all.

"They are coming," he said.

That was evident. Voices and the sound of



running feet heralded the approach of Stolemkin's men.

Gordon bade the postboys be ready and he persuaded Sofia to enter the carriage for convenience's sake, and that was her only concession. Belof was behind.

The dusty grey of the evening mingled with the mist of the Neva blurred all outlines that night, but a figure shouting "Sofia—fly," came well into view. It was Vasili, and he had caught sight of the waiting carriage and guessed it was Sofia.

He shouted again, "Fly—fly—don't wait for me."

A thunderous voice behind bellowed and a great whip cracked.

Gordon said: "Go—Vasili will be safe."

Sofia's eyes were staring wildly towards Vasili and her arms were open to catch him.

A shot rang out. Sofia shuddered.

"By God! they are here. We shall be taken," said Gordon. "Drive on," he shouted to the postboys, hoping to decide for Sofia.

But she leapt from the carriage and called—"Vasili."

"Sofia," came the answer. "Fly."

He had not time for more. There was a curse of thunder behind, a great whip cracked, and Vasili's legs were dragged from beneath him. Sofia gave a cry savage and wild. She fired her pistol and dashed towards her husband.

"Lost," said Gordon, but he drew his sword and leapt to her side.

Stolemkin came on like a tornado. His men flung and used cudgels with effect. Gordon even in a

moment did wonders, but a blow on the head stopped him. Sofia, after smashing a man's face with the butt of the pistol, was grabbed and held firmly. The sonorous glee of Stolemkin gurgled like the running of beer.

When Gordon woke in the dawn, Belof was nursing him and Vasili (whose head had been split in the fall), and Sofia Petrovna was nowhere to be seen.

Louis collected his thoughts, passed his hand over his forehead which was dirty and bloody.

"Woman," he said and looked as if he would fain be eloquent.

Belof, with an anxious face, said—

"What is it, Louis Alexandrovitch?"

Gordon shook his head.

"I have said," he replied, "all there is to be said," and he lay down and dreamt.

## CHAPTER XIX

“ Oh ! the tender ties.

Close twisted with the fibres of the heart ! ”

—*Young.*

COUNT BULAVIN, having knowledge of some things and being ignorant of others, was wearing a smile of hope and cogitating phrases with barbs. A little knowledge and how happy we are ! a little ignorance and how serene we keep ! Since at any moment our ignorance may become knowledge it behoves us to be calm.

Count Bulavin, for example, knew much that interested him from the mouth of Marie, Countess Puroff's maid. But he also ignored the fact that Sofia was Count Stolemkin's prisoner. Hence his rejoicings.

Marie had confessed, as Sofia guessed she would. Lured, she wept. Flattered, she hesitated. Threatened, she told. She was wofully afraid of her skin and gabbled freely. When she tried a little hesitation, Count Bulavin replied with suggestions of torture, and the implements looked horrible as the threats were ghastly. Besides Marie knew she had been a party to the conspiracy and, that fact elicited, the lever was powerful. She told all

she knew with sobs and entreaties of course, and was a mere bag of tears at the end.

But Bulavin was happy. He held the secret. He rapped the fingers of his right hand on the knuckles of his left and drank brandy.

Poor Stolemkin! (Language was free and immoderate). Vasili's wife the sister of a robber and no Countess at all. Ha! Ha! Ha! And Stolemkin's boast that rang from Moscow to St. Petersburg. Estates in Livonia, Revel, Ukraine and Moscow. Jewels to dazzle a court, enough wood to build a St. Petersburg and more than enough fish to stink it out. Ha! Ha! Ha! By all the Saints! but life seemed very pleasant—except for poor Stolemkin! Did he know? And he had prized his daughter-in-law so highly! Such a fine woman! The figure of a Venus etcetera etcetera. Ha! Ha! Ha!

More brandy.

Bulavin was a seasoned drinker as well as an accomplished rogue. He considered the situation. The humiliation of his old friend Stolemkin was not only a matter of delight but of imminence. St. Petersburg had listened to the boasts, it should now get recreation from the ridicule. Boasting is only a firework with the tail of an illuminated guy.

But all that was merely the joy of life, not its gain. Bulavin kept an ear to the music, and an eye on the pay boy—a remarkable feat you will allow, and worth the noting. He cogitated.

His real object was to get possession of Countess Puroff and marry her (with her estates, her jewels, her wood, her fish, her serfs) to his son. Since the

great Stolemkin had missed the prize and the Countess was in hiding in the hands of one Glebof, a brigand, it remained—as a problem—to get the Countess out of the hands of the said brigand and bring her to St. Petersburg.

There was no time to be lost. When Stolemkin learned the news he would be disinclined to sit still and curse. Even Frolof was not without ideas.

Time, that respects no man for his principles but serves most eagerly those who use him best, was a necessity. Bulavin realized that a message must go to Glebof at once. Brigands wanted money like Chancellors and took it—like Chancellors (old style) wherever and whenever they could. The suggestion was: how much would Glebof take to give up Countess Puroff?

A simple proposition. Bulavin thought it over and it appeared to him to be a much better way than to try to shoot Glebof through the head and rescue Countess Puroff by force of arms, because it provided less risk and more hope. So the trusted emissaries of Count Bulavin rode forth, well primed, leaving the Count himself to shoot hints and innuendoes at the lady in Peterof who was supposed to own estates in Livonia, Revel, Ukraine. Ha! Ha! Ha!

So we have now Stolemkin guarding Sofia and Bulavin holding Marie and the secret.

Stolemkin when he returned to the villa at Peterof with Sofia—whom he called a “damnable cat” and sundry other names due to the excitement of the moment—raved without hindrance. He stormed, threatened and cursed. Sofia was pale and anxious,



yet relieved. Vasili was free with Gordon and, somehow, she felt they were not seriously hurt.

"In the morning, my she-wolf," said Stolemkin. "I will see you try no more tricks. You are beginning to fear the wheel and the lash, are you? You think you will escape me—pouf!" He snapped his fingers very near to her nose. He walked the room like a giant, and Sofia sat still wondering what was going to be the next event in her life, and feeling very, very thankful that Vasili was out of the house.

"I will make you pay. What a fool! What a damned fool, you are! Do you think you will humiliate me, you mud of the forest? Your life is your only chance, do you hear? By Heaven! But you shall squeal. I'll grind you to powder or you shall speak. Tell or die—din that in your ears, my sprite of the woods! Tell where the Countess Puroff is or your bones will be ground to powder, you she-thief!"

"Oh! Go home," said Sofia quietly, but very disturbingly.

"You—well, you are the devil's own child!"

He was astonished to silence. He had never met a woman like Sofia before, and was amazed at her strength. But a man with a neck like his was bound to try to force the woman if he could. He stayed that night on the premises to make assurance certain and—took care that his men kept an adequate guard.

In the morning he tackled the situation like a man of blood and no scruples. He would have killed the daughter as he had had the father killed if his purpose would have been served by such a course.

Sofia said nothing. She could suffer to annihilation, and threats and torture would not prevail against her to the extent of making her speak if she would not. It was a nasty business to begin with, for she was sturdy and desperate, and fought like a tigress—but what was she amongst a pack of men?

When she had fainted once and was on the point of doing it again Stolemkin saw the hopelessness of his method. For revenge this might serve, but not for use, and it was not Stolemkin's province to slack his desire upon his enemies in the capital, exactly as he would. Higher people than he would have a word to say to that. Had Sofia spoken, Stolemkin would have soothed the suffering.

She was white, but her lips uttered no word.

Stolemkin was hardly in a mood to be generous or he must have been won to admiration of her fortitude. As it was he cursed her, but refused to attempt any more torture for the moment. At least that was at an end.

But Stolemkin was wild. He saw no outlook save by telling Count Ostermann and hoping to get the power of the Court on his side. But that hated publicity seemed inevitable, and yet—well, Stolemkin felt he could not arrange as he would, and so must manage as he could. It is the lot of most of mankind.

If only he could have managed without interference he would have won praise for his ability in retrieving a desperate situation. If Ostermann refused to move—phew! Stolemkin was then hoist with his own publicity and made a fool by

his own boasts. Most boasters are. No wonder he raged at Sofia and hesitated.

So Bulavin acts and waits : Stolemkin acts and hesitates and Glebof waits and acts.

Glebof began to get anxious as he waited in vain for the arrival of his sister. He was a man of action : his life on more than one occasion had depended on instant decisions being instantly put into practice. That would mean the impossible to the slow of decision, slow of movement folk who still serve a useful purpose on the earth, and incidentally annoy the mercurial.

Glebof decided to go to St. Petersburg himself. It was a dangerous errand for him. It is audacious to try to make corpses of people one day and friends the next. There is certainly charity in the second endeavour, but people as a rule won't look at it in that light. And Glebof had lightened the journey to many a dweller in St. Petersburg, who could not sufficiently approach the ideal to forgive the bandit. Forgiveness, one frequently observes, we call weakness in ourselves and a virtue in others.

But Glebof, making careful arrangements for the safe custody of Countess Puroff, was not afraid of dangers.

When he told her he was going to leave her for a few days, she begged to be taken with him, saying she did not know those who were left and was afraid. Glebof, seemingly, could inspire trust.

" You need have no fear," he said. " The man I shall leave in charge is to be trusted, and I shall soon return."

He had no sooner spoken the word than there

came to him the idea : suppose I do not return ? Yet he scarcely gave a second thought to Melania Nicholovna. She apparently was not his dearest thought, for her lot, under Glebof's successor, ran risks of vicissitudes.

She, however, did not doubt Glebof and faith, as it must do, brought its own comfort.

" Why do you go ? " she asked.

" Because it is necessary."

" Your sister is well ? "

" I hope so. I go to see."

" Oh ! I thought all was going well. Suppose they find out ? "

" They were meant to find out."

" But not till your sister had got away."

" No. I think it is time Sofia came back—that is why I go."

" There is danger, I see. I hope all will be well. I will pray for you. And Louis Alexandrovitch," she spoke tenderly, " have you no news of him ? "

" He should have come with my sister."

She looked afraid.

" There has been no accident ? "

" Accidents are always happening, otherwise we should starve. I anticipate nothing serious, but as the business is delicate I prefer now to go myself rather than send another. So be at rest : nobody will disturb or molest you and I shall soon be back with my sister, and Gordon."

He said the last two words somewhat grimly, but with a sense of their appreciation. Melania Nicholovna looked grateful, and then as the name Gordon sank gently into her consciousness and

she realized why Glebof had mentioned it she went a radiant red and turned on her heel hugging a joy. Blessed name ! Words have their sweetnesses.

After Glebof's departure she became more and more expectant. Nothing crossed the horizon now, but she watched it with hope : the lark heading for the empyrean told her there were good things in the world and bade her be of good cheer. She was very happy when she was allowed to wander to the edge of the wood and look towards the capital, for where our heart is, to there will our eyes be turned.

Glebof, in the guise of a prosperous trader of Nijni Novgorod, went with circumspection but speed. Moscow was announced to them six miles away by some tall spires that crowned an eminence which could be seen from the forest road. The great crescent-shaped city soon appeared before the bandit and his companions in all its splendour (very tempting !) Churches, towers, gilded spires and domes, buildings in white, red and green all glittered richly in the sun. The forest reached to within a mile of the ramparts of the town and Glebof and his party crossed the "living-bridge" over the Moscowa and entered the great city. Glebof was handsomely supplied with passports as with other articles, and the entrance was effected without difficulty.

They went to an inn, kept by a Swede, and noticed there were many travellers about. Some, a party of six, were journeying in the opposite direction. They seemed anxious not to waste too much time but were not afraid of talking.

"Going to St. Petersburg ?" said one, after he had



hoped that peace would be with the stalwart bandit whom he addressed.

"Yes."

"I come from there to go—well we have heard there are plenty of robbers on the road, so our destination may change.

"Robbers?" As if he *was* surprised.

"Have you not met any?"

Glebof's follower shook his head.

"We have not met one—to our knowledge."

"That is hopeful: but we are going in the opposite direction."

"Then you have a chance."

"You really think so?"

"I said a chance."

"We have heard of one Glebof. I think his name is."

"Good or ill?"

"He is a formidable man and pretends to hold his own against an army—you do not know where his headquarters are?"

"You would beard the lion in his lair?"

"If we know where it is we may avoid it. Have you not heard of him?"

"Glebof—the name is familiar—but we are peaceable people and our affair is merchandise."

"His too at times, I fancy."

The bandit laughed good-humouredly.

"Yes. I believe I have heard of him. Do they speak of him, then, in St. Petersburg?"

"Those who suffer must tell their tales."

"They are probably the lucky ones."

"Phew! Is he so bad as that?"

"He is very expeditious they say. I am told nobody lingers."

"Phew. Is he approachable?"

"I understand it is his object in life."

"But I suppose he spares if he gets money?"

"He has never been known to destroy needlessly."

"Ah! So you know him?"

"I have heard, now you remind me, many stories of him."

"And his haunt—can you not tell me that?"

"Through the forest and then—who can speak? He may be here to-day and there to-morrow."

"True. I suppose you have never heard of his lair?"

"He attacks on the hills, in the forests, by the river, who can say where he abides?" "Um!"

And then Bulavin's man ceased his pursuit of knowledge. It happens so often: we are on the point of making the discovery we want, and never know that just when we gave up the search a film of the thinnest gossamer separated us from the secret. A little more and these two men might have understood one another: a little more and it is just possible—though not altogether probable—that the events of this story might have run a little differently.

Glebof's man had been a captain who gambled away his patrimony and was forced to leave the army because he could not pay his debts of honour—and dishonour. He preferred enrolment under Glebof to decay in Siberia. He was of good bearing and education but that won't confer perception. He took his interlocutor's questions for what they

were and did not delve for the motive. Another man would have wondered what the questions meant—but the world rolls on by the aid of the dull and the bright, the blind and the farseeing, and chances are seized and chances missed such as would cause an excitement to onlookers far excelling all that man can invent.

It happened that Bulavin's men went on towards the Valdai Hills to meet Glebof, and Glebof went on to St. Petersburg to discover the whereabouts of Sofia.

Bulavin's men went fast, and we may as well tell now what happened to them. They met one of Glebof's band, who was disguised as a peasant, on the outskirts of the forest, and boldly asked for Glebof. Suspicious at first, the man ultimately took the leader to his chief, and then it was agreed to dispatch a messenger at once to Glebof with the question: "What was his price to give up Countess Puroff to Count Bulavin?"

Bulavin's man asked if they should stay till the answer came, and as the bandit had no intention of betraying the whereabouts of his master he said "they might stay, or go to St. Petersburg or, if they preferred, go to the devil."

Bulavin's man bowed and disclaimed any preference. But he showed one by refusing to remain where he was.

Glebof went warily, but without loss of time, to St. Petersburg. He had passed his men on the road and soon discovered the place where the chain had snapped. Not only had one man been killed but another had disappeared with money to pay

for things and vital instructions. If you must trust to robbers you can safely reckon on being robbed.

Into the new dread city Glebof came. If he were known to be here he would have a desperate fight for his life. But amid the movement of the capital he was unnoticed. He went to an inn near the "English line," so called because the row of houses was principally occupied by English merchants. It was on the south side of the river and was opposite that part of the quay where he imagined Gordon had his rooms.

Once installed he moved quickly. He let it be understood that he had come to buy cotton and woollen goods from the English merchants. His men were sent out to discover Stolemkin's house, Gordon's dwelling and all news possible respecting the wedding of Sofia.

The news was quickly garnered. The wedding was a popular topic and readily discussed. Glebof discovered Ostermann's villa at Peterof and looked for Sofia. But the villa was deserted—there was no sign of Sofia.

The watch on Stolemkin did not produce fruit worth the chewing. Certainly the Count went to the palace and looked anxious, but Glebof began to cry "Where is Sofia?"

The search for Gordon too was barren of result, for Gordon and Vasili were in hiding, plotting to rescue Sofia and failing to find her.

Everybody seemed to hold what somebody else desired. So much scheming was bound to have a serious outlet. Sides don't ache with smiling.

Then Gordon saw Glebof's man again and learnt of the presence of the bandit in St. Petersburg.

"Sofia?" said Glebof as he shook hands and made no other greeting.

"You here—it is a long story."

"Is she safe?"

They were together in a room occupied by one of the other men.

"I—I hope so."

"Hope so." Glebof repeated the word as if it were the preliminary to a fight. Gordon was a fine opponent.

"Sit down," he said, "it is a long story. You can't play tricks on people here before the whole court and then expect to walk off like a man who has drunk his fill at a feast." "I don't need moralizings or anything of that kind, I want Sofia."

"So do I, Juri Petrovitch—let me tell you!"

He told the story of the wedding, the waiting for the messenger, the attempt to escape and the subsequent disappearance of Sofia.

"So the villain knows," said Glebof at the end. "and what will he do?"

"You can't always tell what a villain will do. Vasili says his father wants to find out where Countess Puroff is."

"Why? To get hold of her, I suppose."

"Yes. He would like to make his son divorce Sofia."

"Well, he has been fooled."

"But divorce won't suit either Vasili Antonovitch or your sister."

Glebof could not fail to notice the distinct placing before his observation of the last two words.



" My sister—what do you mean ? "

" One of the most unexpected things on this earth my friend, one of those things that let you understand the saying about the removing of mountains and a man being born again——"

" For Heaven's sake get on."

" It is a subject that should not be introduced crudely and roughly. You, friend Glebof, will quite appreciate the pleasant grove of entrance. You may jump from a rock into some waters, but you must approach this through pleasant alleys and sweet smelling flowers and birds singing——"

" Eh ! "

" You guess ? "

" Sofia——"

" Sofia. Your sister Juri Petrovitch, and Stolemkin's son, have managed so to please each other that they would, I really believe, die for each other. They are married. They are man and wife, and glory in it and thank God for it."

Glebof could not speak for the moment, his surprise was too great. He looked at Gordon keenly as if he must search the truth, but he was satisfied.

" Sofia—married and happy—and to Stolemkin's son."

" Complicated situation ? " said Gordon.

" What does Sofia want to do ? " Glebof asked in a quiet voice.

" Nothing better, I fancy, than to escape with her husband to a wooden house in a forest of pines."

" And—he—the husband ? "

" Just what she wishes."

A pause. Then: "My God! Stolemkin's son."

They were interrupted by a messenger who brought a letter from the deputy chief of the robber band. Having read the note Glebof told the messenger to wait downstairs. Then he shut the door.

## CHAPTER XX

"Even the strong can be forced to bargain."

"WHO is Count Bulavin?" asked Glebof.  
"Bulavin—a man of the same kidney as Stolemkin with perhaps a little less knout."

"He wants Countess Puroff."

"Does he? He is not the only one."

Glebof handed over the letter.

"Bulavin knows something," said Gordon when he had read the note.

"How much?"

"Two things, at least, of some importance. One is that Stolemkin's son has not married Countess Puroff, and the second that you know where the Countess is.

"How did he learn that?"

Gordon shook his head.

"Not from Sofia or Vasili or me or you or Stolemkin himself, I fancy."

"The maid," said Glebof.

Gordon nodded.

"You've hit it. She was missing."

"She should have been killed: she was a worthless thing. Does it matter?"

"It makes things more interesting. With Stolemkin only to think of we could bargain. If he would

let Sofia go we would keep our tongues still about the affair: but Bulavin may gossip. May—I very much fear he will. He will be delighted to spread the news of his friend's—*mésalliance*—Phew!”

“Then why doesn't he do it?”

Gordon paused and considered the letter. “Clearly he wants the Countess—of course, he wants the Countess. Since Stolemkin has not got her Bulavin would hope to win and so he would pay you——” Gordon stopped and looked keenly at his companion.

“It seems,” said Glebof, “that I hold a person of importance in Countess Puroff.”

“Yes,” said Gordon.

“I sell high.”

“But some things you do not sell at all.”

“I have yet to learn them.”

“The hand of Countess Puroff is one,” said Gordon with a defiant ring in his voice. Glebof shook his head quietly.

“It is not one,” he said.

“You mean you would hand her over to Count Bulavin?”

“If it suited me.”

“But it does not suit me.”

“I do not propose to try and suit you, sir.”

“Yet it might be advisable.”

Glebof paused.

“You threaten?” he said.

“I do more. I fight,” said Gordon, “if need be.”

“Thinking yourself better situated in St. Petersburg than in the forest, eh?”

“I'll fight you here, in Moscow, in the forest at the gates of Hell, if need be, for Countess Puroff.”

"So?" But Glebof remembered that he was in St. Petersburg and that Gordon's help might be useful.

"Why should we quarrel?" he said. "But if Bulavin offers a price you must cover it."

"What would you ask?"

Glebof hesitated.

"Sofia's liberty," he said with a sudden inspiration.

Gordon stretched out his hand, but the next moment withdrew it.

"But will you offer the same terms to Bulavin?"

"Why not?"

"And if he frees your sister?"

"That is all I ask."

"Do I not count?"

"It is what you will do that counts. Liberate Sofia, see that she is free from harm and I will do all that you ask and more. But I care neither for you nor Countess Puroff nor for all St. Petersburg so long as Sofia is not free."

Glebof knew what he wanted, and was not all robber.

Gordon was struck by the man's affection for his sister and saw the hopelessness of trying to move him, for Countess Puroff was a prisoner with the robbers and would not be freed even by Glebof's death.

"I will do what I can to free Sofia," he said.

Glebof nodded.

"She must be freed," he said very determinedly.

"And Bulavin?"

"If he can help, so much the better."



"What shall you answer?"

Glebof replied coldly—

"I shall let him know that the price for the freedom of Countess Puroff is the freedom of my sister."

"When will you send the answer?" asked Gordon.

"At once."

"Will you not wait a little?"

"What for?"

"To give me a chance."

"I do not think of you, but of my sister," said Glebof quickly.

"Send your answer," said Gordon, "and, by God! if he wins, Bulavin shall fight me."

So Count Bulavin got the answer to his question, and it made him screw his face.

The freedom of the robber's sister for Countess Puroff! No price at all. She might be tricked out of Stolemkin's clutches like an egg from a nest, and there might be a lot of husk-breaking before the kernel was got at.

Count Bulavin screwed up his face and scratched his head. He felt near enough to rejoicing and had the wisdom not to be premature.

This wife of Vasili Antonovitch—where was she? Stolemkin was quiet too, what was his game?

Bulavin sent for Johan Branui.

"You remember the wedding of Count Stolemkin's son?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"I want you to find out where the bride is."

"She was at Peterof, Nicholas Dimitrivitch."

"Find out if she is still there and, if not, where

she is. I want to get hold of her without exciting suspicion and without losing any time. The moment you have found out any news of importance come and tell me."

That same day Bulavin met Stolemkin. He made it his business to meet him.

"Well, and how is your dear daughter-in-law?" said Bulavin.

"The doctor isn't wanted yet."

"Ah! She is still a being of joy to her father-in-law's heart?"

"She is as precious to me as ever she was."

"Um! Estates, wood, fish, jewels, oh! my friend, but you are lucky! And where, may I ask, is the lady now?"

"In good time, Nicholas Dimitrivitch, but give her a chance for solitude first."

"Solitude?"

"Why not?"

"Or why? It is the same thing. Has she left Peterof?"

"You would not have them stay there for ever?"

"Truly, no. So she has returned, eh, and once more you have your dear Melania Nicholovna beside you again."

"You say it with disappointment."

"I do not feel it."

"No?"

"No. Have you not heard the gossip?"

"What gossip?" Stolemkin's small eyes were disturbed to brightness.

"Ah! ah! It does not do to repeat everything,

and people are so uncharitable, eh, Anton Gregorovitch ? ”

“ I can believe that.”

“ Yet—and yet she was attractive, most attractive, almost remarkably so.”

“ She seems to have made an impression.”

“ Enormous. St. Petersburg, so it is said, will not forget it in our life time.”

“ So great as that ? ”

“ Think not only of the estates and the timber and the jewels and the fish, but of the lady herself—quite exceptional.”

“ Quite.”

“ Birth—irreproachable.”

“ We are all begotten in the same fashion.”

“ Begotten, but blood, my friend, blood. Even fish won't make up for blood. But Melania Nicholovna is well bred as well as wealthy, and now she appears splendid to look upon.”

“ How you would have gabbled, Nicholas, if you had won her ! ”

“ I wonder—— ”

“ Eh ? ”

“ If I should have surpassed you ? ”

“ What have I said save that all know ? ”

“ What could you say that all are ignorant of ? ” said Bulavin quietly.

“ I need your imagination.”

“ There must be more to tell. Have we heard all ? They say—— ”

“ Well ? ”

“ That you are taking great care of her.”

“ Who says it ? ”

"Gossip."

"Pooh!"

"It is not true?"

"It—I—and why not? But gossip can go to the devil, Nicholas Dimitrivitch."

"I believe it reaches as far sometimes. But in this case gossip may tell the story over the capital. Count Stolemkin holds his daughter-in-law a prisoner, says gossip. Why? asks everybody in turn. And the way gossip winks is wicked. Oh! my friend, my dear friend, you should really see gossip wink. A prisoner——" Bulavin winked for example's sake and Stolemkin looked a mixture of pride and fury.

Bulavin was fishing adroitly.

"There is literature in a wink, Anton."

"And damned folly."

"Folly, my friend, is the wisdom of the joyous. And they, you know, give spice to the earth. St. Petersburg is winking to the tune of Melania Nicholovna."

"Who composed the tune?"

"That is the secret, but the tune is catching."

"Folly always is."

"Yes, it is easier to catch folly than a Countess, eh, Anton?"

"That depends."

"Um. But having got a lady, make a prisoner of her, eh?"

"That also depends."

"Of course. Some can hardly be worth it. But what do you say to the talkers, my friend? Where is the lady, to begin with?"

" I could not betray her."

" Generous father-in-law ! She has certainly made an impression. I wonder if she would be as particular about betraying her father-in-law ? "

" Who betrays me will be either very clever or very stupid."

" That is evident. And yet Melania Nicholovna, Countess Puroff, prisoner because her distinguished father-in-law, Count Stolemkin, er—— "

" Well ? "

" I believe it is here that the prudent wink."

" Having nothing better to do."

" Some of them say more."

" Oh ! What do they say ? "

" That Puroff would not have recognized your daughter-in-law."

Stolemkin did not like this : it was too direct. He looked warm.

" She might not have recognized him," he said, as if he would treat the remark lightly.

" By the Saints ! that's excellent. She might not. That is just what gossip is saying."

" What in Heaven's name do people want to worry about my affairs for ? " burst out Stolemkin.

" No, my friend, not in Heaven's name. There is nothing heavenly in what they say. It is a topic for Hell, not for Heaven. They still discuss the estates and the jewels and the timber and the fish and the beauty of your charming daughter-in-law."

" Then if it's a topic for Hell, let those who discuss it, go there." Stolemkin could fence no more.

" I wonder if I might see—Melania Nicholovna ? " said Bulavin blandly.



“ No. At least not now—not yet.”

“ Ah ! She is surely not a prisoner at Peterof ? ”

“ She is not. She is—look here ! Nicholas Dimitritch, we are old friends, but this topic does not please me. Have you heard what happened to Sosonoff yesterday ? ”

Bulavin returned with food for reflection. He had got little out of Stolemkin, but he saw the big Count was unhappy and unsatisfied and, though he would face his railleurs, yet disliked the raillerie.

It was not very definite : clues were wanting. Yet the girl was not a prisoner at Peterof. Where was she ?

Johan Branui had not even found out that when he came to tell his master that Sofia was no longer at Peterof.

Count Stolemkin sat moodily thinking. It was really very difficult for him to decide upon a line of action. He knew he had been fooled, and he would dearly like to cut the eyelids from those winkers who thought to jest at his plight. (In his turn and when occasion presented itself Stolemkin was the loudest jester of them all). What is more galling than impotence ? Stolemkin was beginning to feel that he could do no more. Then must he hear St. Petersburg laugh ? Must his name be a by-word ?

There was just a chance he might win, still a chance he could manage that nobody might laugh without respect.

He went to a cellar, dark and drear, in his house, at which the gorgeous ceremony of the wedding had taken place and there saw the bride.

Escape for her seemed a hopeless thing. She

was in a cold, dark room about nine feet square with two men outside the door constantly on guard. Some things Stolemkin managed well. Sofia had been just kept alive and no more. Stolemkin did not dare go too far. He was not master of the lives, even of those who tricked him, when he was in the capital and under the eyes of the Court. So bread and water and a dark cellar were his attempts now to break the spirit of Sofia. He dared not repeat the torture of limb lest he was forced at last to tell Ostermann the story, and Sofia mentioned the torturing.

Was her spirit worn to confessing point? Could she still hold out?

The two men opened the door, and Stolemkin looked in. He had a desire to seize and shake Sofia or flog her till she did what he asked. But that, of course, was the natural spirit of the men of power in those days. It is only by revolutions that man has been made to respect man.

Sofia was seated on a wooden chair, dressed in a tight-fitting rose-coloured costume, that looked considerably out of harmony with the place. A string of pearls, a fine black one in the middle, was round her neck. Vasili had put it there.

She looked tired physically and weak. But there was a look in her eyes that would have warned a penetrating man that only a fool would try to break her spirit when she had set her mind on a course. It was possible to catch her in a weak moment physically and wrest some admission from her, but she would not be worn by suffering to change her mind. She looked up with indifference

as the door opened, and with contempt when she saw Stolemkin.

He shut the door behind him. It was afternoon, and the light came from a high window that caught a few straggling beams from the kitchen. Originally, the room was a wine cellar.

For a moment there was silence. Stolemkin in his way thought he was as determined as Sofia, but he loved life too much not to be ready to give in to the inevitable. Sofia, aged twenty, could die. It is a state of mind that can laugh at threats. The young die more easily than the old, remember. It is after forty we become optimists.

Stolemkin seemed to have some glimpse of her resolution for he saw from her attitude she was weak, and yet the scorn in her face was as fixed as when she was first incarcerated. He was dressed in a dark green suit with silk stockings, and shoes with silver buckles. He stood before her in an attitude of contemplation. She did not look at him after the first glance. He went through various emotions, hope, disappointment, rage, and opened the conversation with—

“Have you had enough?” spoken with some decency.

She did not answer.

“I can give you more,” he said.

She looked as if all he could do was a matter of supreme indifference to her. The easiest to handle in these great crises are those who cling to life and fear death. A chin like Sofia’s and the fear of nothing before her eyes made threatening stale work.

“Shall I flog you?” he said.

"Don't talk like a fool," she said quietly.

He clenched his fists in his rage.

"My God!" Never had he been so treated by a woman. It was unheard of.

She looked disdainful.

"You waste your time," she said. "I have told you not to worry me."

"But I mean to worry you, baggage! I mean to worry you till I get what I want." He itched to strike her.

"What is that?" she asked calmly, calming him a little with the tone.

"Countess Puroff."

"Then get her."

"Tell me where she is."

"I am not a fool."

"But you *will* tell," he said threateningly.

She did not speak.

"What will persuade you?" he said, and, as he dropped his menacing tone, he came nearest to success.

She shook her head. Perhaps she was a little obstinate, driven by Stolemkin and his method. The shaking of the head seemed to suggest "Nothing—that I can think of."

Stolemkin who loved mastery much, loved victory more. He had for an instant a decent instinct towards a conciliatory attitude.

"Why won't you tell?" he asked.

"Why should I?"

"To save yourself."

She looked at him curiously and searchingly.

"What for? I fear nothing."

"Oh! Not torture and death? Don't be a fool. What will silence serve you then? Tell me where Countess Puroff is; help me to get hold of her and I—yes, I will let you go."

Sofia felt the bending attitude. After all, what was Countess Puroff to her? But why did Stolemkin want her? For his son, of course. For Vasili. Sofia felt a wave of emotion surge within her. For Vasili—where was he now? Was he well? What would happen if Countess Puroff did come and she—Sofia—was liberated? Vasili was married and would go with her to the Valdai Hills. Count Stolemkin clearly thought of something else—divorce. Sofia gave a shrug of contempt. She could laugh at that: she felt Vasili would.

"I don't know," said Sofia.

"Don't be foolish. The day I hold Countess Puroff that day shall you go free. It is ten times better than rotting in this hole—much better than the knout and, I fancy, pleasanter than death."

Sofia was weighing up the circumstances for herself. If Countess Puroff comes she can't be married to Vasili, for Vasili is mine. Count Stolemkin is reckoning on divorce. What does that matter? She had an inspiration.

"Tell Mr. Gordon," she said, "tell him to tell my brother I am a prisoner in your keeping and that you agree to let me go in return for Countess Puroff."

She leaned towards him a little in her eagerness.

Stolemkin hesitated, and then looked pleased. The idea was promising. His big fat face showed content.

The next moment there was an altercation out-



side. Sofia made a dash for the door but Stolemkin, quite alert, caught her, pushed her back and then drew his pistol.

"Be quiet, or I shoot," he said. Then he opened the door.

Vasili dashed past him like a rabbit.

"Sofia, Sofia," he cried like one on the verge of hysteria.

"Vasili," she said as she held him, more like a mother than a mistress.

"Pooh!" said Solemkin with magnificent scorn.

It took four men, nevertheless, to drag Vasili from the cellar, later in the evening.

## CHAPTER XXI

“ . . . A tale re-told, a race re-run ”

STOLEMKIN was amazed at his son. For that matter, he wondered at many things ; but the unexpected antics of our own upset us most. We feel we have a kind of vested interest in our expectations. A distant enterprise in which we placed our money (and hope) may give us a shock when the bankruptcy is announced but it is nothing to the shock we get when A, who has behaved exactly as we anticipated for twenty years suddenly does the thing we never calculated on. Our prescience is at fault. If we are not to trust to our judgment in relation to our own, when are we to trust to it ? Imagine trying to catch a bear and seeing it fly ? Preposterous. Of course, it is preposterous. Balaam's ass was preposterous. So was Stolemkin's son. To see the brave man turn coward is the most shameful, the most humiliating of sights : to see the coward turn brave is to be given a glimpse of Paradise. Heaven surely is the home of the beautiful and the brave. Only the brave are altogether lovely.

But Stolemkin was too much of a bully to think he had seen Paradise because Vasili had shown spirit. Bullies lack the gift of appreciation. Their values are all askew because their common denom-

inator is self. You can't see other people properly when you are always squinting at yourself in the mirror.

Stolemkin wondered without admiration. He ate, drank and kept saying to himself that he couldn't understand, he couldn't really, it was not really understandable. He never thought a woman could accomplish so much. Vasili was such a sugary creature too—all pap and fears! Well, well, well! He went on eating and drinking and considered the other case.

Sofia. He had got her at last. Tell Gordon to tell the brother—um!—all that meant that the brother held Countess Puroff prisoner and now this woman (Sofia) was willing to be exchanged for her.

He would like to flog the brazen hussy that had played the trick on him, but it was better to let the flogging go to escape the awful ridicule of the Court.

If he got hold of Countess Puroff what would he do? Marry her himself, if need be. Vasili must divorce this other baggage, but rather than Bulavin should win and jeer, he (Stolemkin) would marry the little Countess himself.

So he sent for Vasili, for his son knew where Gordon was. Vasili appeared worse for the handling but neither meek nor apologetic.

Stolemkin wanted to strike him for his attitude alone. It was not humble enough. There was no obsequiousness in it. He had sworn at his son in days past for his lack of spirit, but now he wished to knock him down because he showed some. Pure bullyism.

Vasili put his coat straight and looked tolerantly

at a big man who was trying to stop his nose bleeding.

"What has happened to you?" asked Stolemkin

Vasili shrugged his shoulders:

"So much, sir, that I hardly know myself."

"You have got contaminated by this peasant wench. Well, make the most of her. She says Countess Puroff is in the charge of her brother. So go to Gordon, who knows where her brother is, and tell him that I am willing to let his sister go free when I have possession of Countess Puroff."

Vasili looked radiant.

"You will—oh! father." Vasili might have thrown himself in his joy at his father's feet, but he was met with—

"You fool! What——?"

"To rescue Sofia. I will go to Gordon at once. It is a bargain? I may tell Gordon he may rely on this?"

"In the name of all the Saints! what has come over you? And do you dare to doubt my word? I have told you what I will do."

"And Sofia—you will treat her well? You will, father?"

"I will treat you to a flogging, and her too, if you do not go at once, you worm of a jester!"

Vasili actually looked indifferent. He paused, as if he must consider everything first, and looked at his father as if to read him.

"I will go," he said quietly. "But if Sofia is injured, Countess Puroff will probably not come."

Vasili went out like a man who had found the lost sheep.

Gordon and Glebof were getting haggard and impatient. They ran risks, of course, for if Stolemkin denounced them they might be arrested at any moment, and if they were once taken life would quickly lose all zest for them.

The two were together, alone, when Vasili burst in on them. Glebof looked very ugly, for he was beginning to hatch desperate schemes.

Vasili fastened the door and looked first at one and then at the other gloriously.

"You've found her!" said Gordon. "You are an angel! I guessed you would."

"Where is she?" asked Glebof, walking towards Vasili.

"In my father's house," said Vasili.

"Where?"

"*Where!*"

"In a cellar—an old wine cellar. A hideous room for her. But I dashed in. Little Gobellski told me where she was, only I must not betray him. So you must never mention that. Poor little Gobellski, I must reward him! I dashed in and——"

"You left her there?" asked Glebof.

"I come with a message from my father. They dragged me from her. It took four of them too. But my father wanted to send a message to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"My poor Sofia! If they touch her. But I don't think they will. Two of them had to hold her and I nearly broke the head of one——"

"What is the message?"



"Yes. Father says he will give up Sofia if you will give Countess Puroff up to him. You will?"

"Your father be damned!" said Gordon, and then he looked at Glebof.

"I thought he would think it worth while," said Glebof quietly. "You needn't damn the villain, Gordon, for it is the price I offered you or Count Bulavin."

"But he holds your sister," said Gordon. "The offer is not much good to me now."

"Then why didn't you get hold of her?" Glebof shook his head. "This is a bargain," he said, "I can't afford to wait any longer or risk more."

Gordon was disturbed. The knowledge that Sofia was in the hands of Stolemkin and he was ready to give her up for Melania Nicholovna brought home to Gordon the proximity of a crisis. So long as Sofia's whereabouts were unknown there seemed always a chance of something happening to set him on the road to his heart's desire. But in Stolemkin's hands Sofia would be held to due ransom and Countess Puroff in the power of Stolemkin was a thing unthinkable.

Glebof seemed more contented now he knew where his sister was.

Gordon caught his eye. Glebof held the cards.

"It is very hard for Countess Puroff," said Gordon.

"Would you have it harder for my sister?"

"You know what it will mean to Countess Puroff?"

Glebof shrugged his shoulders.

"What will Stolemkin do?"

Gordon paused to think. Vasili was married, what could Stolemkin want with Melania Nicholovna? Yet he was not a man to give up vengeance for nothing.

Vasili interrupted—

“ My father thinks I shall divorce Sofia.”

He said it with an exquisite intonation—when one thinks of what the old Vasili was. He might have been referring to a child or a cripple, or to the pious wish of an incapable, for he spoke as if the thought were equal to a jest—no more.

Gordon, in spite of his perplexity, smiled slightly.

Glebof was serious, but could not miss the attitude. Besides, Vasili had not a commanding air. He was now just a being of respect. His hair hung deep in his neck. His dimpled chin and thin nose looked unharmonious in rough affairs. His brown eyes though, once so timid, now had a fine frank gaze. There was tenderness and depth, and a woman would find pleasure in them, but they did not droop and look timorous. As eyes they had changed wonderfully. Mirrors of the soul—they well deserved the title. Vasili had got a new soul or else made his old one take on a new fire. He sat on the edge of the table, dangling his thin leg, stockinged in pale blue. His coat and breeches were dark blue and his vest was flowered with exotics unearthly. He looked debonnair and almost happy. After all he had found his Sofia!

Glebof was interested by the remark.

“ Divorce Sofia—— ” To him the remark was not jocular: it was something terribly serious—if there were any seriousness in it at all. At present

unfortunately, he had had no word from Sofia herself. But Vasili seemed honest, and he loved her. That was an odd thing. But not so odd as that Sofia loved him. Gordon said that was true.

"Suppose your father makes you," said Glebof to Vasili, for he too was of the commanding order and knew that the strong compelled the weak.

"Makes me?" repeated Vasili, leaning forward.

"Yes."

"He won't."

"He might."

"He can't."

"Can't," said Glebof, while Gordon smiled interestedly. The two big men caught each other's eyes again and agreed (without saying anything) that the remark was worthy of notice.

"No—can't. Nobody can," said Vasili. "Of course I might be punished—I don't know. I might even be tortured, but that wouldn't make me divorce Sofia—unless she wished."

"Does she wish?" asked Glebof quietly.

Vasili looked at him with surprise.

"Sofia? No. But you have not seen her. You do not know. She might at first, but not now. Now—I cannot tell you. I would die for her, Juri Petrovitch, and I think she would die for me."

They were all silent. Glebof and Gordon felt themselves in a somewhat strange atmosphere. Vasili was in love and recked little of the atmosphere.

"Is it really true?" Glebof asked Gordon.

"I think so."

"True," repeated Vasili, surprised at the question. "But of course you haven't seen. It is true."

"And what does my sister want?" asked Glebof.

"I—I did not ask. But of course she must be set free."

"Yes——"

"But," interrupted Gordon, "is there no other way of setting her free than by making Countess Puroff a prisoner in her place? That is not chivalrous."

"Do you think I am here for chivalry?" asked Glebof, in his direct way.

"Is it fair?" retorted Gordon.

"I have nothing to do with that either. My desire is to free my sister. Tell me a better way than exchanging the little Countess for her."

"It is possible to take her by force now we know where she is."

"This is St. Petersburg, not the forest. I know nothing of ways here. But I will run no risks for Sofia, why should I?"

"For the sake of another lady?"

"For your sake, eh?"

"Why not?"

Glebof shook his head. He looked a difficult man to move. His was a hard type—his affection for his sister was a wonderful thing. His eyes were black, and bridged with fairly thick but orderly black eyebrows. He had the long commanding nose, a sloping forehead with his perceptive well developed. He cultivated a moustache, but it was small, and did not hide his mouth, which in spite of the moderate thickness of his lips formed a straight line when shut.

"There is no why not," he said. "I shall do the best for my sister, not the middling or the moderate, but the best."

"Regardless of other people?"

"Yes. Regardless of other people. She comes first. Don't try to move me, Gordon. I know what I want and what I mean to do. Suppose you tried to get Sofia out by force from this Stolemkin—and failed, eh, what then?"

"Well?"

"Is it not likely he would think it was all trickery, this pretence of fetching Countess Puroff and hand Sofia over to the police?"

"You easily think of failure."

"You have not succeeded so well, have you? You tried to rescue her from Peterof, but you failed." Glebof made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "If Sofia were free it would be different," he said.

Gordon looked dissatisfied. He saw that Glebof was, from his point of view, acting wisely. Yet the outlook was not altogether dark even if there were clouds to be seen.

Gordon might have risked rescuing Sofia from Stolemkin. In case of success there would be an instant hue and cry, and if Sofia, by any mishap, should be retaken, Glebof would forgive nothing, and what might then happen to Melania Nicholovna was a thing not fit for speculation.

And Gordon had still a chance. Stolemkin would take care of Sofia. She was his hostage. She was his shield and buckler against the slings and arrows of outrageous laughter: but Melania Nicholovna would not be so guarded. Holding her Stolemkin



would think all well. The guard would be dropped, for nothing would be feared and then—— It would be doing the world a service to rid Stolemkin of Countess Puroff. Still, there is no necessity to drag the world in.

So Gordon was silent, and considered and considering acquiesced.

“What will you do?” he asked of Glebof.

“Send for Countess Puroff.”

“Shall I go back and tell my father?” asked Vasili excitedly.

“No,” said Gordon.

They both looked at him wonderingly.

“Why?”

“If Count Stolemkin is set on a divorce it might be as well to keep his son from him—till he has given up your sister.”

Vasili laughed—the laugh of the emancipated.

“You are afraid for me,” he said.

“I don’t want anything to happen to spoil this compact,” said Gordon. “Let the exchange be made and then——”

Vasili talked of nothing on earth divorcing him from his beloved Sofia, but Glebof made him promise, nevertheless, that after one visit to his father (which would probably include an interview with Sofia) Vasili would promise to keep away from his paternal home.

Vasili looked rebellious, but wound up by saying that he would refuse to tell his father what Glebof’s reply was unless he was allowed to see Sofia. He was delighted at the idea.

“I will go for Countess Puroff,” said Gordon.

Glebof did not answer at first, and he certainly looked dubious.

"You may trust me," said Gordon, seeing Glebof's doubtful expression.

"I find it wise never to be too trustful," said Glebof.

"Nobody lives without trusting somebody."

"And nobody thrives who trusts too much."

"I will give you my word."

"Pooh!"

Clearly Glebof was a tough man to handle.

"My God! You are about the only man who dared say that when I offered my word."

"No offence, Gordon," said Glebof calmly. "I want the actual so far as I can realize it. I live like kings and commanders. I take what I can and trust as little as possible, for all men are moved by their advantage."

"And other things?"

"Their satisfactions—and of course people are fools. Nobody can count on the course of an idiot." He shook his head.

"I mean," said Gordon, "to fight for Melania Nicholovna."

"Well?"

"I want to let you know—that is all."

"I know. I always imagined you would. You have some of the instincts of—our friend here."

Vasili laughed. He appeared to be the most joyous of the three.

"Whom will you send for Countess Puroff?" asked Gordon.

"A messenger. But you can go if you will. I

trust you. I trust very few, but when I do, it is because I cannot help myself."

"I will take Belof with me," said Gordon, advancing towards Glebof and holding out his hand.

"Her man? Very well. There will be others. And you will ride fair?"

"I would be beside her, that is all. Since she must come to St. Petersburg, I would come with her. I will be honourable. It will be when Stolemkin has her that I shall get my chance."

Glebof nodded.

"Yes, I trust you. Hasten, for I want to see Sofia free, and if I can, I will help you afterwards."

So Gordon got ready again to journey to Countess Puroff. Belof gave himself up to tears and ejaculations and prayers. He was going to greet his mistress at last. Gordon felt cold beside him—till they started, and the face of Melania Nicholovna grew more and more distinct. It was to Gordon a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The auburn aureole, the azure lights beneath. . .

And for a moment Gordon thought of her in the arms of Stolemkin.

He yelled to the post-boys to go faster.

## CHAPTER XXII

“Let one but bear your love, I’ll bear your cares.”

—*Henry IV.*

A SECOND time to fetch Countess Puroff ! What had not happened since Gordon went the first time at the request of Count Stolemkin ! The stars had rolled on in their courses, the moon had waxed and waned, the great unfathomable unsoundable things outside the earth had continued their ordered labours, all things else seemed the same and yet with him—Gordon—what a difference !

Now as he set out a second time to go on the road towards Buof—but not so far—the incidents of the first journey came back to him. Nickoff and Pendeff were with him then. And yet how different in atmosphere, not only in men, it seemed ! There was a colour as of flowers in the first journey. It was pleasant but without great zest : there was motion without excitement, a rosiness without thorns. The landscape came and faded ; there was a dim murmur of oozing time, there were the ordinary joltings and stoppings, all without a blaze till Melania Nicholovna appeared.

At the thought of her Gordon twisted. He had lived an adventurous life, but this slip of a girl had

put her delicate hands on his heart and he could not chose but love.

The carriage whirled on, jolted, went smoothly, stopped, went on again. Life's progress.

Melania Nicholovna. . . . He recalled with vividness his first sight of her, her winsomeness, her naturalness, her trusting look in her sea blue eyes.

As he sat back in the kibitka he lost all touch with his surroundings, lost all sense of motion. He did not realize it, for he was not usually a self-inquiring man. He was not for ever asking himself why he did this and that and probing into the innermost cupboards of his motives. He gave himself up at this moment to the luxury of living over again that meeting at Buof. He had recalled it dozens of times and yet frequency could not stale its infinite charm. He was another being, gentle, almost timid, one who waited and looked for a sign of favour.

Melania's features played all sorts of pranks with him. He found it difficult to recall her more exactly, and the inability almost gave him pain. It was as if he might lose her altogether. If he could not see her exactly as she was then anything might happen. He really felt a vague sense of something untoward, something that might be disastrous. Then some little turn of her head came in wonderful vividness. The effect was instantaneous and remarkable, as sudden as a child's turning from sorrow to gladness. Gordon tingled. He could do nothing, of course, but just lie there and enjoy and hope the vision would stay.

But it went. It was succeeded by others and



always the effect was the same : the fighting Gordon became as gentle as a child. He got exquisite happiness from seeing Melania come out of her house, get into the carriage, and recalling the sound of her voice. Her voice and little turns of her head were more persistent impressions than isolated features. . . . "Louis Alexandrovitch"—to recatch her manner of saying that was a thing ecstatic.

On dreaming—dreaming and seeing visions—Gordon went.

He recalled that hideous capture in the wood ! (He could not do otherwise now than live over the past journey). What awful things might have happened ! Bandits—wretched cut-throats ! Phew ! A sense of the danger struck him keenly. These robbers were capable of anything, and if he had been killed or the paper lost. . . What a gloomy speculation !

And yet as it had turned out, all was perhaps for the best. Perhaps. . . . Had he taken her to Stolemkin Vasili might have married her. That was a torturing thought. Some other man might have married her. She would have been in some one else's arms, those eyes would have looked in another's face, that hair been caressed by another's hands. Melania, that dear jewel !

Gordon sat up. That vision was too unpleasant. He looked round to dissipate it. "On ! On !" he cried to the postillions.

By town and village, across river, through valley and forest they went. Gordon, usually observant, saw little of it all. Everything was transfigured.

The landscape faded, the forests faded, the rivers even melted into a human face.

It was a dip into present realism when there was a stop at the post houses. Gordon then had to give up his rioting thoughts.

As they drew near to the home of the robbers near the Valdai Hills, one of Gordon's company rode ahead. He observed and was observed by a wood-chopping peasant and realized that all was well.

Gordon in this place had again but one thought with a hundred faces. Definitely it was: Here is Melania Nicholovna. Disturbingly it was, everything such an idea might transmogrify.

Gordon peered to right and left. He looked out of the kibitka first to one side and then to the other. He was unstable, astatic.

He saw men first, but they did not interest him. These men whom he would have observed so critically at other times were mere specks before his eyes. And yet he had to see them properly.

The leader was a tough man in the prime of life. He had been a big landowner who had gambled away great possessions and joined Glebof for a life of excitement. The life had sobered him and he became a businesslike bandit.

He read Glebof's letter and greeted Gordon courteously. (Gordon was restless as a leopard).

Brouin—the bandit—said: "You want to see the little lady?"

"I do," said Gordon. Little lady, indeed! And the bloodless tone of the question! Gordon was piercing every nook and cranny of the place with his glances.

Brouin pointed with his hand to a wooden hut among the trees.

"May I go?" said Gordon, with not quite such audacity now he actually saw.

"You will be ready to start soon?"

"As soon as you wish."

"Then don't delay the little lady. The chief says no time must be lost."

"I shall lose no time," said Gordon fervently, and he strode towards the abode of the "little lady."

He caught sight of her, for the noise of the movement of horses and carriages and men had disturbed her and she came out curiously inclined.

He wished to run—that is, he had an instinct that way, but checked it, for, after all, he was scarcely entitled to swoop down on her like a hawk on a rabbit.

She trembled. Doubt, possibility, probability, and then a wild emotion possessed her and she waited with tingling joy.

His hat swung off and he caught her hand. "Melania Nicholovna."

And she, with nothing more than: "Louis Alexandrovitch." But her hand trembled and then gripped his as if she would be held longer. She coloured like a garden in the sun and her eyes hinted at a thrilling tale.

"At last," he said, feeling more than he could say and desiring to say so much.

"Oh! at last." She, too, found words not easy. Emotion has tremendous power. It can raise, lower and dominate. Speech is its slave. For the

moment it held these two bound, and unloosed them slowly.

She recovered and looked at him as if he were a hero extraordinary. Perhaps it was the long expectation that heightened the attitude.

"I was so afraid," she murmured, the roses in her cheek. "Is all well?" They grew calmer with words and more comfortable.

They strolled towards her hut where rude chairs were outside, and she sat down. He explained the situation, how Sofia had been captured by Stolemkin and what that gentleman's demands were.

She paled.

"He wants me?"

"It is the condition."

"I will not go," she said.

He made no answer.

"Would you let me?" she asked. A feminine question. A *ballon d'essai* from the heart's headquarters.

"Dear lady. I would let you do all you wished that was for your good. But I—what am I?" Something of a grappling hook for the balloon, this last.

"Louis Alexandrovitch," she murmured, as if that were enough. "And you would let me go to Count Stolemkin?"

He took her hand boldly. "Would you give me the right to try and guard you?"

It was not direct enough, and she looked at him so that her glances gripped his soul. He could not wait. He was a man of action, head over ears in love with a girl whose eyes played havoc with him.

He took her in his strong arms and held her to his breast.

"Will you give me this right?" he said with accents so true of feeling that she felt as happy as a sailor who crosses the bar. She was in the harbour where she would be, and looked up to him with bewitching roguery: for radiant happiness will insist on an outlet, and we have so few channels for ecstasy no wonder we are occasionally surprised at the antics of the happy.

"You take it," she said softly, nestling rather than struggling.

He took her chin in his hand, and her lips were quivering. He slowly bent his head towards hers. "And this?" he said, staying, not to violate.

She flung her head back surrenderingly, and he pressed his lips to hers.

"My God! Melania . . . My God! . . . You are my angel, my star of morning and noon and evening . . . I will never let you go . . . And I have no right to hold you like this and kiss your sweet lips."

"Why?"

"Because I am not fit to touch you. It is Beauty and the Beast, the Dragon and the Virgin, Riot and Innocence——"

She put her hand on his mouth. "I am happy," she said. "I could not be happier."

"Oh!" He groaned with a curious mixture of accusation and joy. "I feel as if I had no right to be so happy. I would fight for you and die for you, my queen and yet I fear I must not live for you——"

"Why?" She trembled and looked anxious.



" I am a mere soldier of fortune—— "

" But you would not leave me now ? "

" By all the Saints ! I believe you are wooing me ! You darling of my dreams—and yet if a man with a decent hand and of good stock may not marry where he loves, what is the good of war and glory ? "

" Does that mean you will not leave me ? " Her little hands were stronger than a ship's cable.

" It does. And it does not. Melania my pure in heart ! my pearl of woman's sea ! Oh ! let me hold you to me again, for I feel like a freed lion, Samson out of prison with my hair grown—love's hair, you know, my beauteous queen."

She smiled, almost weeping, and felt he was everything a man should be.

He was clearly in a mood of wild delight, and she was very pleased at it. He had to get over his transports and then (still holding her, for he could not let her go) he faced the situation.

By this time she knelt beside him and he stroked her hair.

" What will Count Stolemkin do ? " she asked.

Gordon shook his head.

" What he wants to do is probably something that his black heart could prompt, but his son will trick him, and I. . . ." He took her face in both hands.

" Well ? "

" I'll grind him to powder before he shall come between us."

She looked in his eyes before speaking : the attitude was too joyous to be disturbed too soon. " But suppose——"

"What?"

"I do not know. I only suppose." She was draining the glass of joy. "I wish I had not to go."

"It is the only way." He was serious with the future standing gaunt before him. "I wondered how I could take you from here, and it is almost impossible, for if I attempted that, dear heart, I must succeed. Failure would be too awful. There must be no failure. You could not be retaken by these people. They—ugh!"

She shuddered too.

"Stolemkin," he said, "will never think he must guard you. He guards Sofia because there has been an attempt to set her free, and if she escapes, he loses all. But once he has you he will think he has won all. He will house you well. You will be treated like a grand Duchess: he will boast of his feat all over the capital and—we will quietly leave him to his shouting."

She put both hands on his.

"Whatever happens . . . I love you Louis."

He put an arm round her gently.

"As long as I am alive, Melania, my own, I will deal with you according to the love I bear you. Your enemies shall be mine. Who seeks to make you unhappy shall find in me his bitterest foe, and may I behave to you as a man of honour and feeling and never cause you a single regret."

Her eyes filled.

"I know now that what you do is best," she said.

"The Saints help me!" he said; "but there is overmuch to be done if that bully Stolemkin should

suspect. . . . But this is more than reward. It is heavenly measure——”

They kissed each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

The horses were changed and Melania Nicholovna was given an hour to get ready. Most of her wardrobe had gone before in the care of Sofia. So preparation was an easy matter.

Gordon strolled in the wood and felt a blithe being.

Melania dashed to the door of her hut at each alternate minute to catch a glimpse of him—back or front, it did not matter which. The gathering of garments was a scrambled affair.

Nickoff and Pendeff were not allowed—by Glebof's express mention—to return with the party. In case all went well they would be freed later. Glebof was a cautious person.

Again on the road to the capital.

Melania Nicholovna was considered, for a couple of feather beds had been thrown at the bottom of her kibitka, and Gordon made the journey appear almost like roses all the way. She was interested in everything. The baying of the wolves, the swift shuffle of a bear, even the post houses seemed to her interesting beyond measure. It was because he was by her side: the old, old story. It is not so much what we see in life as *how* we see it. It is our appreciation of things that lifts them to the rank of the precious.

When Gordon and his party drew up at Novgorod they did not notice the observant attention of a man at the post house. Perhaps they were cumbered about other things, tired and not

fearing. They let the man get a good start, and he seemed to know the worth of the information he was riding with. Also just outside St. Petersburg, another man (clearly on the look out) went speedily forward without loss of time and in advance of Gordon's party.

Melania Nicholovna grew more nervous as the destination grew nearer. She would have continued the journey indefinitely (so many would like to do that with nice journeys !) As long as Gordon was by her side she was happy, but the arrival in St. Petersburg meant separation and the terrible risk. She grew afraid, and Gordon had to comfort her.

She travelled as Countess Revel with her attendants : Glebof had suggested that.

One of the party went ahead just before they entered the city to warn Glebof of their approach.

They came in St. Petersburg with prudence, and the wide thoroughfares and sparsely-built streets took Countess Puroff's attention, for the young will ever be most attracted by the eye. The ear gets its reign later. The beasts, you will notice, get their pleasures neither from eye nor ear.

Glebof received them warmly, for he had been over anxious, as a man not fitted for perfect trust must be.

A room was engaged at the inn for Melania Nicholovna and her woman.

Glebof was much relieved and looked grateful to Gordon. The other men were dismissed to their waiting places to be ready for the journey back to the forest when Sofia should be free.

Glebof had arranged to meet Stolemkin, or to

deliver up Countess Puroff to him, in a room at some distance from the inn where he was staying. He considered this merely prudent.

He was not a very demonstrative man as a rule, but he was clearly a little excited now: perhaps he had begun to distrust Gordon when the latter had been out of his sight for so long. He said two or three times to Gordon as they sat together, "I am so glad to see you . . . ." It was the vain repetition of a man who would express some pleased feeling. He walked the room as he spoke, too, and looked at Gordon at first with gratitude and then almost sympathetically.

Gordon had separated from Melania Nicholovna with desperation. He would not say good-bye,—the very words racked him—but he was on the precipice of anxiety, and his silence was a thing to be remarked. He looked at nothing and was obviously meditating.

Glebof murmured: "I am glad you came so well. . . . I—I will remember. . . . We will soon free Sofia now. . . ."

He touched Gordon. The two men looked at each other. Glebof's unspoken question was: "You are not grieving, surely?" Gordon's unspoken answer: "I scheme when I am in trouble."

The looks were sufficient without speech. Penetrating people save themselves and other people a weary waste of words and time.

"Sofia free," said Glebof sympathetically, "I will help you."

Gordon held out his hand.

"I will let Stolemkin know," said Glebof after a little silence.



Gordon nodded. He could offer no objection.

So the message went to Stolemkin that Countess Puroff was in St. Petersburg and that the exchange agreed upon was ready to be carried out. The messenger waited to learn Count Stolemkin's suggestion as to place and time.

Stolemkin had been anxious, and at sundry times had looked at Sofia with bloodshot eyes. He treated her decently but kept a close guard over her. It was the uncertain prospect that made Stolemkin anxious: he could not trust Glebof and did not know what was to be the outcome of the bargain. He hoped (which was healthy), but had his moments of distrust—which were uncomfortable.

He read the message with gladness. Countess Puroff here—. . . . At last! Now he could afford to talk once more of the estates and the timber—a pest on that! He was really rather weary of the catalogue, for Bulavin had teased him sore. Bulavin?—Ha! Ha! He thought of his old friend with delight. Bulavin had certainly hoped to laugh at him—he had heard news, had snatched rumours from somewhere, but what a fool he would look now! . . .

Stolemkin rejoiced in his position. Countess Puroff in St. Petersburg and ready to be handed over to him. This was capital news: news of the rosiest hue. He stamped the floor in his triumph and then paused to doubt. The canker of happiness—peuh! This was the doubt: Having been deceived once, who was to guarantee that he would not be deceived again?

It was a reasonable doubt, and a reasonable doubt is as wholesome as the cutting off of a gangrened toe — and as pleasant. Triumph retired to a corner : joy disappeared too. The gay throng of Stolemkin's revellers dispersed at the appearance of this grave and respectable figure of Doubt.

Stolemkin swore—without improving matters.

He swore a second time. He then began to ask himself the question : What *would* satisfy him ? Nobody in St. Petersburg knew Countess Puroff, who therefore could give him assurance respecting her identity ? Then was he to be deluded a second time ? Joy had turned to horror in the twinkling of a thought !

He sent back word that he must be convinced the lady delivered up to him was Countess Puroff.

Glebof looked grave. Gordon smiled : the humour appealed to him.

"What can we say ?" said Glebof.

"That we are acting now as honourably as we would be treated : that I give my word the lady to be handed over to him is the one I was bringing to him on the first occasion and that he can see and speak to her if he will swear to come alone."

Glebof hesitated. He did not care about letting Stolemkin see the Countess, but considered afterwards it would do no harm and might convince Stolemkin, who was quite justified in acting with caution.

So the messenger returned, and Stolemkin after further consideration sent back word he would accept those assurances and visit Countess Puroff. He dropped a hint that if all did not go well the lady in his custody would not emerge happily.

The meeting was arranged for that same day at nightfall.

In the meanwhile Glebof got ready for a journey. Vasili was in a fever of excitement.

"I will go and see Melania Nicholovna," said Gordon.

Glebof consented.

## CHAPTER XXIII

"Do not, for one repulse, forego the purpose  
That you resolved to effect."

—*The Tempest.*

MELANIA NICHOLOVNA was paler now, but showed delight when Gordon went to her.

He told her of Stolemkin's doubts and of the projected visit.

"And when it is over?" she asked.

"When he is satisfied, you will go," he replied.

She looked at him as if they were to begin the telling of a tale too grave for light introduction.

"But be ready, dear, for I shall come like a thief in the night. Maybe the very day you go."

"I will be ready," she said in encouraging tones.

"If possible, give me a signal from your room—a kerchief at the window—anything remarkable will do. I will invent the rest."

She was brimming with excitement, and he clasped her to him.

"I will do anything you wish," she said.

"I will prepare for our escape two ways—either by an English boat or by carriage. But that is for after."

After a while she said: "I will pray."

Gordon returned to Glebof and then went to make preparations for his own escape with Melania Nicholovna.

It had been agreed between Stolemkin and Glebof that if the former were satisfied no time should be lost in exchanging Sofia and the Countess. Stolemkin was to come in a carriage with Sofia and Glebof or his representative in a carriage with the Countess, and the exchange should take place in the open. Both sides swore to deal honourably and straightforwardly, without cunning or *arrière pensée* or ulterior design of any kind ; and neither in respect of what had happened should pursue the other.

The terms were the suggestions of both, and as both were heartily desirous of an arrangement, each seemed willing to agree to the other's demands with little demur.

Stolemkin was not afraid. He set out well-armed after giving instructions to the guardians of Sofia and taking with him one attendant, who followed discreetly.

He drove some way in a carriage and then walked to the appointed place.

The meeting was curious. Glebof and Gordon were together, and Stolemkin came in with one hand on his sword and one on his pistol. The three men bowed. Glebof looked at the man who had ordered his father to be flogged with feelings of curiosity and hate. The feeling was instinctive and would not be repressed even by the importance of other issues. He betrayed very little, for he was an undemonstrative man.

Gordon spoke.



"The question is the identity of Countess Puroff."

"Yes," said Stolemkin.

"Well, I give you my word the lady you are about to see is the lady who when I first made her acquaintance presented herself to me as Countess Puroff. She it is I was conducting to St. Petersburg when we were captured, and she will tell you herself she is Countess Puroff. I would stake my life on it."

Stolemkin hesitated. Gordon rang true; and besides, he was trustworthy in spite of the big trick.

"Show me the lady," Stolemkin said.

"It is agreed," interrupted Glebof, "that you are acting straightforwardly."

Stolemkin scowled.

"What I say I will do I will do," he replied haughtily.

Glebof was not disturbed.

"It is your intention to deliver up my sister for Countess Puroff and not to instigate the police or anybody else to interfere with us leaving St. Petersburg."

Stolemkin paused. His pride felt uncomfortable, that was all.

"It is. And yours?" he said curtly.

"I will deal truly with you. I want my sister. I wanted more. I meant more. But now I will be honest and fair with you. Give my sister her freedom without trickery, dodge or subterfuge, and you shall have what you most want—Countess Puroff."

Stolemkin had enough insight to see the truth in the bandit's words and tone. He felt pleased now he had kept Sofia, for the very sacrifice Glebof seemed willing to make heightened the prize.

"Let me see her," he said.

"And if you are satisfied?"

"I will bring your sister in a carriage—or send her—to the Admiralty. You will do the same with Countess Puroff. Please arrange that there be no delay in the street. The ladies will change carriages."

"That will do"; and Glebof then turned to Gordon: "Will you lead the way?"

Gordon followed by Glebof and Stolemkin—the latter refused to be sandwiched between the two—walked across the yard to a room at the other side where Melania Nicholovna had been waiting.

"Where is Belof?" said Glebof.

Gordon looked: the man was missing.

"Perhaps inside." He knocked at the door of the Countess's room.

There was no answer.

Gordon went in. There was nobody there.

He spoke in the hoarse accent of passion.

"She's gone," he said, and he glared at Stolemkin.

Glebof dashed in and drew his pistol. He turned on Stolemkin and Gordon like a fury.

Stolemkin drew sword and pistol, and his face was a blotched thing with his cold staring blue eyes seeming to desire to leap out.

He snorted and grunted. It was all incoherent at first.

"A second time, eh," he jerked out at last.

"You devil!" said Glebof, and he looked murderous if ever a man did.

They were a desperate three. The presence of

Countess Puroff meant so much to them all, and none knew how it had happened save that the woman they all set a prize on was gone.

Gordon, like a knight robbed ruffianly of hope ; Glebof like a prisoner bereft of ransom ; Stolemkin, a robber cheated of booty.

They were ready to mistrust each other.

They spoke little save for curses and noises at first. The rage in their faces was hateful. They eyed each other in turn and saw themselves eyed back. The triangular whirl of glance was horrible and yet sobering. If each were so furious, all were cheated.

Stolemkin in big black boots, purple breeches and a red coat with fine embroidery, his big fur coat unbuttoned, held out pistol and sword, but did not know whom to strike. He plainly considered himself a victim.

Glebof accustomed to strike on the instant, was stayed by the unusual circumstances ; Gordon, heart-rent (not " pocket " like Stolemkin), felt like shrieking, cursing, striking. But the obvious frank fury on the faces of the other two calmed him and let him see with some clearness.

" Your handiwork ? " he said to Stolemkin.

" Ah ! Ah ! " Stolemkin felt deluded. " You rogue ! You thief——"

" By God ! Be quiet, or I will kill you where you stand, you fool," said Gordon.

" You kill me——" said Stolemkin.

" Be quiet," said Glebof, and all their pistols were up in the air. " What does it mean ? "

" I left her here," said Gordon.

"Then who has taken her?" Glebof looked at Stolemkin, who jeered in his rage.

"Can't you see, you stupid," said Gordon, "that we lose perhaps more than you. What do you want to grin like that for? What object have we in the Countess's disappearance? Haven't we been at some trouble to get her? If any of us has an advantage in her secret removal it is you, Anton Gregorovitch—you, do you hear? And if you have had a hand in this I will slit you into pieces."

Stolemkin was quietly sobered. He had been too furious to say much, and now he had sufficient coolness to see the dismay in the faces of the other two.

"Where is she then?" he said with a snarl.

Gordon and Glebof looked at one another and at once began to examine the room. They went down the stairs, and in the stables they found Belof, who had been guarding the door. His head was split open, but he was alive. When he came to he told all he knew. He had seen two men approach in friendly fashion. Suddenly he was knocked down and knew no more. He did not recognize his assailants. His grief was heartrending. He blamed himself and seemed almost mad.

Who had done this thing? Stolemkin went back to see that Sofia was still safe and gave Glebof twenty-four hours to produce Countess Puroff. At the end of that time . . . the rest was easy conjecture.

But it was not easy to trace the Countess. Gordon, Glebof and Belof were as keen in their search as desperate men could be, but clues were not easy.

Their feelings were like those of storm-tossed mariners who see a sail and buoy themselves with hope only to see the horizon swallow up all chance of help. They were almost ready to call to the mountains to fall on them and to the earth to swallow them up. To end like this? And where was Melania Nicholovna? In durance vile? alive or dead? The phantoms of fancy came to torture the heart-stricken three—nay, five at least, for Sofia and Vasili felt it too. The men were scouring St. Petersburg, and the twenty-four hours that followed Stolemkin's departure saw the hunters give themselves no rest. And then the news came.

Stolemkin got it first. He met his friend Bulavin, and the sight stirred suspicion.

Bulavin looked in a manner triumphant. They greeted each other with feelers, so to speak.

"Still happy as ever?" asked Bulavin.

"Still and ever," replied Stolemkin, longing to swear.

Bulavin shook his head.

"And we are all likely to fall into pits, to grasp the shadow, to mistake appearances for realities——" He shook his head again.

Stolemkin wished he could shake it for him.

"You sound mournful, my friend."

"Then I belie myself."

"Um——"

"Um. There is no man in St. Petersburg has a right to be happier than I at this moment, Anton Gregorovitch."

"Ah! . . ." Stolemkin was saying to himself.

"And what has made the rogue happy?"



"Let me see," said Bulavin, "what was the enumeration?"

"Enumeration? of what?"

"Estates in Livonia, Revel, Ukraine and Moscow——"

"Still at that?" snapped Stolemkin.

"Still—my friend, I am only just at it. Also jewels to dazzle Europe, wood to build the world's ships, fish to feed——"

Stolemkin waved his hand impatiently.

"The fish stink. I am tired of the tale. Are you still jealous?"

"The fish stink," repeated Bulavin with a smile. "Not the Countess's? not those belonging to Melania Nicholovna, Countess Puroff. They are alive and wriggling. There is caviare for all the courts—that is if your estimate is correct. And as for being jealous, now why? Jealous, when there is offered to you, Frolof and me such a glorious chance. We are the chosen three, Anton Gregorovitch, and the winner—peuh! Estates, fish, wood, jewels, serfs—peuh! And I jealous of you now?"

"You look roguish to-day, Nicholas Dimitrivitch," said Stolemkin, feeling very much at sea with Bulavin's spray scattering sentences.

"I feel it. I feel like Jacob when he got his bride—after seven years, was it? or fourteen? I am not good at these things: but to win at last—well, it must be glorious eh, Anton?"

Stolemkin thought it must, but he looked as if he were far from thinking of such a pleasant thing at that moment.

"And that was a gorgeous wedding of yours.

Vasili and his bride . . . Where is the lady now ? ”

“ What the devil do you mean ? ” said Stolemkin with a face with plenty of blood in it. “ What is it you are hinting at and smirking about and dancing like a damn cat for ? ”

Bulavin was not disturbed.

“ Hinting at,” he said. “ Haven’t you found out your mistake, Anton Gregorovitch ? ”

“ What mistake ? ”

“ The mistaken bride ; or, Good Lord ! what is the matter with my daughter-in-law ! The deluded parent ; or, By Heaven ! I will make somebody smart for this. Stinking fish ; or Who the devil landed the wrong pike ! Mistake . . . You ask me what mistake ? ”

Stolemkin looked as if he would like to handle Bulavin roughly. He came a step nearer and glared furiously. Bulavin, conscious of victory, would not haul down the flag.

“ A plague on your jesting tongue ! In the name of the saints ! what do you want to say ? ” Stolemkin said.

“ The fact is,” replied Bulavin, “ that what I have to say won’t be said at once. It takes time. You could not tell the virtues of your daughter-in-law nor the list of her possessions in a word. It isn’t possible. But now that St. Petersburg is likely to know, eh. Now that you have discovered that the fish stink——”

“ To Hell with them.”

“ A very good place too for rotten fish—they go well with sour grapes, eh ? But what will St.

Petersburg say? Some of them may say they do not like to be invited to the wedding of a peasant's daughter——"

"What do you mean?"

"The wife of your son Vasili . . . It was clever, Anton Gregorovitch, but not clever enough. Passing her off as Countess Puroff before the Court——"

"Be silent! Do you think I knew? Do you think I did it knowingly?"

"The Court may say so, my friend. You will have to prove that you did not know the peasant girl was Countess Puroff."

"You have had your finger in the pie, haven't you? Well, I knew nothing. You would have been taken in as I was."

"But I was not taken in, and I did not take in my friends. Nobody likes being fooled, Anton Gregorovitch—the daughter of a peasant passed off as Countess Puroff——"

"The tale is not all told yet."

"But it only wants the telling."

"You don't know all. There are things to happen yet."

"Yes. I can tell you one."

"What is it?"

"The marriage of Countess Puroff—the real Countess Puroff, not a sham."

"Yes, yes, but to whom?"

Bulavin paused.

"There is no reason," he said, "why you should not know. Melania Nicholovna is going to marry my son."

"A lie!"

" Sir ! "

They faced each other glaringly. A pair of dogs straining at the leash of decency. Bulavin was the cooler. He looked like a man who saw his foe beaten : his head was high.

" Melania Nicholovna, Countess Puroff, will marry my son," he said quietly, with annoying precision.

Stolemkin grasped the truth.

" You have her ? "

A pause. Bulavin was making the most of his victory.

" I have."

" Then you robbed. You stole her like a bandit. My God ! "

" Tut ! tut ! And you would buy her from a bandit. You would let the child of a peasant be taken for a Countess by all the Court. You would truck and bargain and keep your son's wife a prisoner so that you might get hold of the Countess, and because I beat you——"

" Beat me ? " Stolemkin was white with rage.

" Yes, beat you, Anton Gregorovitch."

" Be damned to your beating. Be——" and then he stopped. He felt somehow a beaten man. But he was too heavy and thick to collapse utterly. He heard the jibes and jeers, the wit and sneers and the lampoons that would soon be thick as the mud in the streets. He wondered for a moment if he could snatch Melania Nicholovna from the keeping of Bulavin and turn the laugh. But quickly came the flash of memory : " He has got her first and therefore has won."

Stolemkin was beaten. But he was not a man

to turn round and congratulate a successful rival at any time : and at this time he felt more like rending him.

Bulavin did not make the situation easier. While Stolemkin scowled and looked possessed of ten devils, he smiled as if on nodding terms with the god of victory. The laurel was in his hand and he held it out ostentatiously. He muttered—

“ You must come to the wedding. We——”

Stolemkin turned on his heel.

“ There is no wedding yet,” he said.

Bulavin watched him go and smiled.

“ He takes his beating badly,” he said comfortingly to himself.



## CHAPTER XXIV

“ . . . Weep I cannot :  
But my heart bleeds.”

—*Winter's Tale.*

**G**LEBOF, Gordon, Belof and Vasili had visages that could not be called beautiful. Rage and unrest were there and despair was getting the upper hand of hope : and that takes the light from a man's face.

Gordon had suggested Bulavin as a likely abductor and had done his best to spy out the land in that direction. It was when the four had met again after a fruitless search that Vasili was persuaded by Gordon (to speak truly he needed very little persuasion) to call on Bulavin.

Bulavin's reception of Vasili can be imagined. It was the overflowing hospitality of the spider that has gorged. Bulavin's talk was not direct : he flipped at subjects and made suggestions. His questions were irony indelicate. He thought at first that Stolemkin had sent his son, but soon found out his mistake. At last he told him the truth. Vasili asked to see the Countess.

Bulavin thought the meeting would be ironic and a little triumphant, somewhat Roman. He led Vasili to the Countess and introduced them.

Vasili said : " It has been a very exciting time."

" Yes," she said, " and tell Louis Alexandrovitch that I was taken by force, will you ? "

Bulavin smiled.

" Yes, you can tell him," he said. " Men, dear lady," he added, turning to the Countess, " are flying at each other's throats on your account. You are another Helen. But Troy is upset. And Vasili Antonovitch is married—you know that ? "

" I do."

" And the lady ? "

" Yes, I know her too."

" It is better so. Count Stolemkin does not feel like an archangel : but it is better so."

Melania Nicholovna went to Vasili—

" Tell Louis Alexandrovitch where I am and what has happened. This man says I must marry his son : but I won't——"

" Chut ! " said Bulavin. " It is the order of the Regent. You must be careful. Your head is too pretty to fall off yet. And Louis Alexandrovitch can find a wife elsewhere—perhaps amongst the bandits."

Then he showed Vasili out and locked Melania up.

Vasili went out with despair chastened a little and hope returning. He was not altogether happy, for his lot was most unpromising : but hope smiles at every beam of good fortune.

At least, they knew where Melania Nicholovna was. Gordon, Glebof and Vasili were together discussing the situation and the gloom grew blacker and blacker.

In anybody else's hands a ransom could have

been paid ; but Bulavin wanted no ransom. Gordon was most satisfied, for, in his eyes, all places for her were ill unless she were by his side. She must be snatched from Bulavin as she was to be taken from Stolemkin. Knowing where she was, Gordon began to dream of schemes. Hope was burning within him.

But Vasili and Glebof were almost lampless. They saw the way very dark in front. What would Stolemkin do ? He was to give up Sofia when he got Melania, and now that he had not got Melania he would certainly refuse to give up Sofia.

Gordon suggested they should attempt to rescue the Countess and Sofia—Melania first. Glebof said curtly, " Sofia first."

Rescue was their one hope and they dwelt long over the details. They were fearless and desperate and their suggestions were not lacking in daring. But as failure would probably be fatal they preferred to be slow and sure rather than risk all on a dash, which might succeed in getting Sofia and Melania out of the respective prisons but might fail to carry them safely out of the capital.

Bulavin might be taken by surprise, they argued, but Stolemkin would not.

Money was fortunately of little concern with Glebof, who had so many purses of other people to dip into, and heavy bribery of the servants of both establishments were agreed upon.

Vasili's knowledge of his father's staff was reckoned useful. The details of the plan were arranged with scrupulous care : escape was to be swift and seemed easy. Hope again came into the faces of Glebof

and Vasili as well as in Gordon's. They ate once more and drank and then dispersed on their several errands. But Stolemkin upset them all.

He went from Bulavin a beaten man. His pride was a thing to be cherished, and he had boasted as well as any man in liquor could do. What a mouthful he had made of the "Estates in Livonia, Revel," et cetera. He cursed himself and squirmed now.

And the Court would jeer! They would never let him forget he had been duped by a peasant's daughter. Bulavin would spread the tale all over St. Petersburg. Bulavin would now see in the possession of his family those estates in—ach!

How he cursed Bulavin! Bulavin, who had been beaten; Bulavin who would have had to eat the dust of defeat if only those villains had not interfered—That put his thoughts on Sofia. He would make her pay. She would expiate. She should suffer. No more would she hold her head high and take a pride in her devilry. Yes, she should suffer. There was some satisfaction in the fact that he held her prisoner. Well, he would hand her over to the police. They would flog her and cut out her tongue and send her to Siberia. Serve her right too, he gloated. She deserves it. He wished he could give the whole brood of them into the hands of the executioner. He felt like blood: he was thinking in hecatombs almost.

Ideas breed ideas almost as prolifically as the urstdiest rodent begets its young. Hand the whole brood over. . . . Why not? He began to chuckle over the idea and gloat over the prisoners before

they were taken. Glebof the brother and Gordon—why not? They should squirm too. They should be flogged and sent Siberiawards so that they should trouble honest men no longer. Yes, the woman, Gordon, and Glebof. They were all there waiting for the police. After all, one got some satisfaction from the flaying of one's enemies.

If only Bulavin could be included in the batch. He had got the Countess.

Stolemkin was striding the floor like a being tremendous and fearful. He stopped. Rage was not in his face. He was vindictive now with a grin. He looked like a biter rather than one to give blows. He had another idea—conceived in rage and begotten in spite.

Yes—yes—yes. He was clearly rejoicing over this idea. It was something good beyond the usual: it was seemingly better than having Gordon and Glebof and Sofia whipped in St. Petersburg and banished to Siberia.

It was to include Melania Nicholovna!

"Why not?" he was saying to himself. "She was one of the plotters. She is as thick in the business as any of the others. She told all, lent her clothes and her maid—the vixen! the little rogue! the—the——"

His lips were dry with excitement and he licked them with relish. He sat down for a moment and murmured "Bulavin." He considered his ideas so full of richness that he could scarce enjoy them at once. They dazzled him. "Bulavin," he whispered again, and then he actually chuckled.

"Got him. Got the sly devil! Oh! He shall



rage too ! He would laugh at me. . . . He would cackle of her estates eh, and jewels——(He boggled at the word “ fish ” somehow).

He called for his carriage. He was in a wild raging delight and a wild delightful rage. He could knock you down and yet laugh with you.

He really considered he was very very clever.

And certainly he was preparing a very pretty pit for a few people against whom he felt he had a grudge.

He went direct to Ostermann who was now High Admiral and had placed the villa at Peterof at the disposal of Vasili and his bride. Stolemkin was one of Ostermann's close followers and had been rewarded in consequence, for Ostermann had thriven.

Since the day when Gordon had been asked by Stolemkin to bring Countess Puroff to St. Petersburg there had been great changes in the government.

The Empress—Anna Ivanovna—died in 1749, and Biren, her lover, was named Regent. But his rule was unpopular and short. He was surprised in his bed, taken prisoner, and then packed off to Siberia, and Anna Leopoldovna became Regent in his place. She was a foolish woman, and being too idle to dress herself would lie for days on a couch.

When rulers forget their duties the people remember their rights.

Münnich, who had arrested Biren, was now made Prime Minister, and Ostermann, who had been Vice-Chancellor, became High Admiral.

It was to the latter, a scheming man of talent, that Stolemkin now went. He had not to wait long

to be received, and then he told his story. He told it with art. His object was to tell it in such a way that Count Ostermann would feel that not only had Stolemkin been cruelly deluded, but that the Court had—the Empress, he, Ostermann, and all those who had been present at the wedding.

He succeeded.

"They have tried to make fools of us all—and did not care who we were," Stolemkin ended with.

Ostermann was annoyed.

"And they are in St. Petersburg?"

"Yes."

"Where is Countess Puroff?"

"Bulavin took her. What is the trick she played on the Court to the advantage he hopes to get?"

"But will not get," said Ostermann curtly.

Stolemkin was beginning to rejoice. He told where Gordon and Glebof and Sofia and the Countess might be found and Ostermann took notes.

"They may try to bolt now they see their plot has not altogether succeeded. But I have the woman," said Stolemkin.

"I shall soon have them all," replied Ostermann, and then he spoke of other matters—of the Princess Elizabeth and his suspicions concerning her. He asked Stolemkin to find out all he could about her—if she were ambitious and seemed desirous of aiming at the throne.

Stolemkin returned with feelings of joy animating his big bosom and his fat face. His principal satisfaction was his fancy concerning Bulavin. He had a desire to call on his old and trusty friend so that he

might be there when the police came and took away—the estates in Livonia, Revel and Moscow, the jewels and the wood, the—er serfs——

He saw that Sofia was safe and could not resist going in.

“Have you all that you desire?” he asked.

“Save liberty.”

“I shall soon let you go.”

Her eyes brightened.

“Has she been found?” She had been told of the Countess’s disappearance.

“Y—yes.”

She looked very glad without being at all demonstrative.

“When?” she asked.

“When what?”

“When will they come for me?”

“Soon—very soon I think—and hope.”

She looked at him keenly, for she did not like the tone. It was not genial and there was gall in it, and she detected the sourness at once.

“You look like the devil,” she said quietly.

“And you will soon feel like it. You she cat,” he retorted losing his temper. “You will soon go from here. They are coming for you—but do you know who they are? The police, my vixen. You sorry wench, you will soon have time to think over your villainy. And your brother too. The police will soon have him; and then it will be whack! whack! oo—— My God! Your backs will be 11 ribbons, do you hear? You——”

“Go out,” she said very quietly, for she was white  
“I wouldn’t talk to a bear like that.” She spat on

the floor expressively and then waved her hand with the contempt of one who can face death.

He went out with a laugh, forced for the occasion. Then he thought of the Princess Elizabeth.

When the police came Sofia saw struggling was helpless and went easily.

Bulavin shrieked like a wounded wolf when the police called on him. He refused at first to let the Countess go, but the order was imperative. Ostermann had power. So he swore all would be well and patted Melania Nicholovna on the back as she went out weeping. He imagined that an interview with Münnich or Ostermann would set all right. The arrest of Glebof was a different matter. He fought like a lion. To him, of course, liberty was life. His agility and strength were amazing. Poor Belof with him was knocked down in the struggle and badly wounded. Glebof managed to get at the head of the stairs, and there he played his sword like a hero. But the police were not heroes and would not go to him. Two of their number were lying on the ground and the others produced muskets. Glebof, with pistol and sword, held the stairs, but his object was escape, and that was certainly more difficult than remaining where he was.

The police saw it and invited him to surrender. He glared at them and schemed to flee. But a man on the roof opened a trapdoor and hit him on the head with a stone. One of his men was taken with him, but Vasili, hearing of the arrest, warned Gordon, who kept in hiding and was not found.

These two sat together at night with their heads unequal to the task their hearts demanded.

Sofia was calling to Vasili. (He had been to his father's house and with taunts and curses had learnt the truth.)

Melania Nicholovna was calling to Gordon, and he sat by the Neva and hid.

They were both still, tired, and their hearts at sunset. The frost outside froze their souls. The world was very hard.

Melania and Sofia taken prisoners. . . . This was not light nor negligible. It was one thing to snatch a prisoner from a private house: it was another to effect an escape from the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. And very few got off lightly even . . .

Yet Gordon was only hard hit (very hard, all the same): he was not hopeless. All the time he wondered what to do. It is the salvation of the soul, this gazing into activity. What to do . . . otherwise he was a mere copy of dejection.

Vasili was limp. He had wept and raved at first, for his father had spared him no details. The elder Stolemkin gave other people credit for the possession of feelings when he wanted to wound them. He really hoped then that their feelings were deep. So he pictured Sofia's fate to Vasili with realistic brutality. No wonder Vasili howled, and one forgives him struggling with his parent. He was thrown out with curses. Now he was weary. He saw misery and darkness in front of him.

"What will happen?" he said plaintively, feeling only too well that no sun could shine into his dark cave.

Gordon was staring through the wall, across the



river, through prison walls, to Melania Nicholovna, a frail slip of a girl who needed a man. He had a heart of steel.

"What is not prevented," he said.

Vasili looked a little surprised.

"What—have you any hope?"

"I always hope—but I don't bother about that,"

"But what can we do? I can think of nothing. And Sofia——" He caught the wrench at his throat. Poor Vasili!

Gordon looked up.

"Be a man, Vasili," he said, taking him by the arm.

"You have surprised me before; don't disappoint me now."

Vasili's timid, affectionate brown eyes looked appealingly at Gordon. To him the dawn promised no reward: he had merely the hope of youth—that the worst would be averted somehow.

Gordon, six feet two of him, bent forward to resolution and saw super-Herculean tasks for one who, after all, was not even Hercules.

A man can't charge a prison. What is the good of rushing singly at a regiment? Sense must be served.

Thinking of ways and means kept his spirit alive, his lamp burning. But when he saw himself invariably in a *cul-de-sac* with grinning Stolemkins and a horde of police, he began to think of life as full of trouble and not an overjoyous thing.

He began to think of Melania Nicholovna again and was shaken. Those eyes that came from the sea and told of deep wonders: that sunset-tinted hair that promised such golden dreams and the clinging ways—just suited to a big man like Gordon,

who was a born protector—what was to be her fate? In prison she was hostage to savagery.

Something would be done surely. It might be futile, but something must happen. . . . Gordon asked himself what would really be done to the two women. . . . Sofia would certainly smart: she could not escape. The rights of peasants included floggings in those days. It was a thing not to be omitted. But a Countess . . . They had it too, for Peter the Great boxed ears like a virago and did not care whose they were. Besides autocracy is always served by whips: their cracking is the music of the absolute. Yes, Melania Nicholovna would not be spared any more than Sofia. . . .

Gordon shuddered.

Yet Gordon hid. While she languished he was forced to hide. Autocracy, tyranny, cruelty flourished. Tricks abounded but the strong won. Mercy was the thinnest of shadows and fed on crumbs. The strong deemed it expedient to show their strength: they had not learnt the great lesson that it is just the strong who can afford to be weak.

The Neva was flowing slowly under a frost-keen air. The streets were almost deserted. Gordon could rest no longer in doors and walked along by the Admiralty buildings, looked up at the sky, where the clouds promised and broke their promises like weak princes and strong women.

Nothing gave hope: the strong seemed pitiless. It was force that built this great new city: what could one man, hunted and forced to hide, do against all the power of law and government? And yet

something must be done. But what? Oh! for a plan!

He sighed for the miraculous and felt it a waste of breath.

He leaned over the wall and watched the river flowing by, with the ships made in cunning and foolish guise by the genius of Peter.

On the river rolled, staying neither for sympathy nor comfort, cold and tremendous. It seemed symbolic.

What was the end to be? The end . . . the very word seemed pregnant with blight. Hope was dying.

Gordon turned round and saw a man watching him. He put his hand on his pistol. The man advanced a step. Gordon was ready for a fight, almost eager.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he said. "Speak quickly."

The other man advanced.

"Gordon."

"Lestocq!"

"Yes. What do you do here?"

"I am cursing fate."

"Pooh!" Lestocq took Gordon's arm. "Fate is the prison of the weak and the mortar of the strong. Come with me, old friend. I will give you something to do that will knock Fate off his pedestal—off his throne. I was looking for a man."

"I wonder if you can help me?" said Gordon, snatching at the man and the tone. "I fear not."

"Help you—I'll give you something to do; and if you succeed you can ask for what you want

and you shall have it. The wish is at your feet. We are going to make history this night. Come with me——”

“You are not deluding me?” said Gordon, surprised at Lestocq’s language. “I have things to do——”

“If I fail I shall die the death,” said Lestocq, “but if I succeed, if we succeed—come along, my friend.”

“Some one dear to me is in prison—can I get her out?” asked Gordon with heart beating fast.

“Can I ask that? Can I secure that.”

“Get her out—marry her, and fling her enemies to the wolves if you want. Yes, all that and more.”

“Don’t jest. Don’t talk lightly.”

“My friend, I am the most serious man in St. Petersburg to-night. I am playing for the great stakes of the great.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Come with me: you will,” said Lestocq.

Gordon, hope again in his bosom and fire in his veins, went gladly.

It was dark and cold, but the darkness must give way to the morning.

## CHAPTER XXV

"She was his life,  
The ocean to the river of his thoughts,  
Which terminated all."

—BYRON.

**L**ESTOCQ shut the door.

"Now, my friend, who speaks first?" he said. "Only I have little time to lose."

"What is your plan?" replied Gordon. "I only want to rescue a lamb from the wolves—my lamb."

He found he had to tell his tale, so told it succinctly.

Lestocq listened without interrupting and, when Gordon had finished, said—

"You shall be with us. We are to move mountains to-night, if we can move Princess Elizabeth."

Gordon looked astonished. He had met the daughter of Peter the Great before, and sniffed great designs.

"A revolution?" he said.

"A new Empress," said Lestocq. "Now do you see your chance?"

Gordon did.

"The stars are shining for me," he said. "I would do Princess Elizabeth a turn at any time and feel the honour of it. But when I know that the



other gang would torture Melania Nicholovna and that Princess Elizabeth would free her—the good God sent you to me this night, Lestocq. Take me : give my sword or pistol a chance. What is it you want ? Lord ! I feel like Hagar in the desert : the water is gushing.”

Lestocq took him by the hand.

“ You shall drive her carriage,” he said. “ You shall arrest Ostermann and Münnich and Golovkin and Mengden—Stolemkin too if you wish.”

“ Thou hast escaped arrest thyself, I will make thee arrester of many. Lestocq, old friend, I am mad. I will brave the whole Palace if need be now. Let’s pray for the dawn. What a wakening ! ”

“ A moment. Don’t be impatient. The Princess hesitates, for she likes pleasure : but you and I must persuade her this night. I have the men ready : we want the Princess to move and Russia is at her feet. She knows me ; but a new friend—a big friend like yourself—will just move her. You shall launch her wishes.”

“ I am thinking of Stolemkin and Ostermann—and Bulavin too, in the name of all that’s just and holy. Peuh ! I feel I could remove mountains. As for the Princess, I would serve her in any matter.”

“ Come with me now to see her,” said Lestocq.

Gordon went gladly. He was a different being from the man who watched the Neva less than an hour ago. The miraculous had happened. Nothing short of the colossal could have freed the prisoners Gordon wished to liberate, and here was the colossal. A revolution. . . . It was history. It was the

thing which raised some and laid others in the dust. One was exalted, another abased ; one freed, another imprisoned. It turned people upside down.

" They threaten to put her in a convent," said Lestocq, referring to the Princess.

" A prison, eh ? "

Lestocq laughed.

" She trembles at the idea. It will move her. They are suspicious but know nothing."

When the two men reached the palace occupied by the Princess, Lestocq quietly went round first to see if the score of Grenadier Guards whom he had heavily bribed were ready. Then he went, with Gordon, to the Princess Elizabeth.

She started at first on seeing Gordon, but on recognizing him appeared very pleased. A new ally seemed to give her encouragement. Other plotters were there, and Lestocq at once began to plead with her to strike the blow at once—that night. She seemed afraid.

" If we fail," she murmured.

" Then we all perish on the wheel," said Lestocq.

The Princess was a fine woman physically. She had a long nose, full frank eyes, a mouth of feeling and an affectionate chin. Her figure was ample and most attractive.

She felt the risk for those who would serve her.

Lestocq—he was her physician, but a born intriguer—handed her a card on one side of which was a picture of herself wearing the Imperial crown : and on the other she was dressed as a nun and surrounded with racks and gibbets !

She looked nervously at the nun's dress. David would have been as glad a monk.

"It will be so unless we strike at once," said Lestocq. "In a convent——" He shook his head. She looked hesitatingly round and her eyes caught Gordon, who was watching her anxiously, for on her action depended the happiness of Melania Nicholovna.

He dropped on his knee—he was a quick reader of faces.

"We are dying to serve Your Majesty," he said.

The phrase touched her. "Your Majesty." . . . She seemed braced by it. She turned to a corner of the room where there was an ikon lit by a golden lamp and she prayed before it.

When she rose Lestocq kissed her hand and looked radiant. He took her at once into the room where the Guards were.

She asked if they would be loyal to her. They said they would die for her.

"I will never forget your devotion," she said. "Go back to the barracks, get your comrades to join you and wait for me."

She then put on a mail cuirass under her dress. The die was cast. Gordon saw Promise beckoning to him.

It was one o'clock when, clad from head to foot in furs, the Princess was led out by the radiant Lestocq to the sleigh that was waiting outside.

Gordon was there ready to drive, and they went to the Preobrazhensky barracks, where the Guards, eager and enthusiastic, welcomed her madly.

She spoke to them and inflamed them with her words and her promises.

This was the bloodless revolution of December 5, 1740. In the raw cold morning Princess Elizabeth, flanked by Gordon and Lestocq, led three hundred Guards to the Winter Palace.

The capital slept. Winter was a great soother. One or two sentinels wondered at the invasion but were disarmed before they could offer resistance or raise the alarm. In the palace Gordon headed the wild harbingers of the new regime, and they at once rushed to and surrounded the Regent, her husband and the infant Tsar, and carried them prisoners to Elizabeth's palace.

The revolution was over.

Lestocq kissed his sovereign's hands and so did Gordon.

"I will never forget you," she said with tears in her eyes.

The cannon boomed from the fortress; the capital awoke to morning and the news; crowds came hurrying to the square in front of the palace in spite of the biting wind, and hearing the news, called for their Little Mother. The imposing Elizabeth stepped on the balcony amid the cheers of her people and bowed to them as Empress. Russia had a new ruler.

Lestocq was wild with joy, but an hour later, meeting Gordon, he asked—

"Well, have you arrested them?"

Gordon looked ecstatic. A new world seemed to lie before him. He ticked off his fingers.

"Ostermann, Münnich, Mengden, Golovkin, Stolemkin—peuh! Stolemkin and Bulavin. Phew! . . ."

Lestocq patted his friend on the back. "She will not forget you," he said. "Nothing will happen in prison to-day; your friends can be freed to-morrow."

"God be praised! I am afraid lest at any moment I wake and find it but a dream!"

Lestocq smiled.

"What would not the Regent and Ostermann and the others give if only to-night's work were a dream?"

"Yes. What would not many of us give if some night's work were but a dream?"

"Go and lie down and rest. You will have plenty of time to rejoice."

"I must let them know in prison—also poor Vasili." He understood what Vasili suffered.

Gordon, even after his long vigil and exertion, felt no fatigue—the mind treats the body like a galley slave at times.

It had all happened so swiftly that neither the great tragedy of the revolution, nor its historic importance, touched him. This great outstanding fact of history was less than his own affair. He was a new man himself with Melancholy and Fear flung far away and Hope and Security very present companions.

He got his authority to visit the prison from the new Empress (who told him that his reward was sure), and he left her with a heart too full for calm reviewing.

Melania would be free—would be his. (What was the name of a new Empress to that! . . .)



The curtain of the night had lifted and all things were becoming clear and distinct. What had been dark became light, the vague was clear, the threatening ceased and all the world seemed bright.

At the prison there was some doubt and incredulity. News did not travel over the capital with even celerity. But all were soon assured and Gordon was admitted. He found Sofia and Melania together. Sofia stood apart, but Melania, opening wide her eyes, flew to his arms. She was pale and her eyes were red, but hope dashed in her cheeks and more than content at the sight of Gordon. She said nothing but "ah!" and then "You," and flung her arms round his neck. The "You" was exquisite.

He held her to him.

Very quietly he spoke, for we often enough behave with calmness under the stress of great emotion.

"You are free, dear heart," he said. "Free . . ."

"Free?"

"They will do us no harm?"

"No."

She paused: the news was so good.

"And—Sofia?"

"She too. All of us free and—in favour. It is too good to be true, and yet not half good enough. Free from all danger. Free for love."

Melania cried for joy. And Gordon felt, now that he was in the land of his great desire, as he had never felt before, in a beautiful and peaceful joy.

Sofia said, with anxious accents: "Vasili—and Juri?"

"We will find them," said Gordon with a beautiful assurance in his tone.

Sofia was biting her lip: she was feeling deeply.

"We are all really safe from trouble?" she asked with a hint of tremulousness in her chin.

Gordon told the tale of the night's happening.

Sofia said: "Take me to them."

The Empress Elizabeth offered Gordon a captaincy in the Guards (which he accepted) and gave him also a present of ten thousand roubles. Stolemkin was banished to one of his estates, while Vasili and his wife, Sofia, occupied the house in St. Petersburg.

The marriage of Countess Puroff to Louis Alexander Gordon was an affair of great brilliancy—quite as brilliant as had been the marriage of Sofia to Vasili.

Vasili and Sofia were together at a window as Gordon and his wife drove away after the ceremony, and there were tears in Sofia's eyes.

"They are happy," said Vasili to her, taking her hand.

She nodded. Then she looked at her husband.

"And you?" she murmured.

Vasili gave a little jerk of his head.

"I think I am the happiest man in all the world," he said.

Sofia looked as if she would speak. Her lips trembled and she turned her eyes filling with tears of joy towards Vasili.

"You too, my Sofia?" he said, putting an arm round her.

She nodded her head.

"It is wonderful," she whispered.

And Juri, her brother, seeing her with her husband, felt that among the unexpected things in life might be some of entrancing beauty.

THE END



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